



The Girl Connection

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE ADOLESCENT FEMALES INVOLVED WITH OR AT RISK FOR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM
THE IOWA GENDER-SPECIFIC SERVICES TASK FORCE /DECEMBER 2002

Is the Internet a Threat to Girls?

The Crimes Against Children Research Center, funded by the U.S. Congress through a grant to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, came out with research in June 2000 that explored the negative impact of the Internet on children. They interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,501 male and female young people age 10 to 17 who used the Internet regularly. Sexual solicitation, exposure to unwanted sexual material, harassment and parental awareness were the primary areas explored.

The following is a synopsis of some of their findings. The full report (62 pages) can be viewed at unh.edu/ccrc/index.html

Total Youth Surveyed 1501
Reported Incidents of Solicitation 286 (19%)

Gender of Youth Solicited
Female 66%
Male 34%

The report stated that "girls were targeted at almost twice the rate of boys (66% vs. 34%), but given that girls are often thought to be the exclusive targets of sexual solicitation, the sizable percentage of boys is important."

Gender of Solicitor

Male	67%
Female	19%
Don't know	13%

(It is important to note here that it is easy to misrepresent your gender online.)

Place on Internet of incident

Chat room	65%
Instant messages	24%
Other	11%

Some of the conclusions drawn in the report regarding sexual solicitation include:

"Not all of the sexual aggression on the Internet fits the image of the sexual predator or wily child molester." *(generally the adults young users were involved with were young adults - age 18 to 25)* "A lot of it looks and sounds like the hallways of our high schools."

"Girls were somewhat more likely than boys (59% vs. 41%) to have formed a close online friendship with an adult." *(these were relationships formed regardless of the nature of the relationship)*

"The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing in the right place but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment."

Dorothy Nevill, *The Reminiscences of Lady Dorothy Nevill*, 1907

What did kids do when they were sexually solicited online?

According to the report, 49% of the young people solicited did not tell anyone. This number decreased to 36% when the solicitation was aggressive. An aggressive solicitation involved meeting off line or being asked to meet off line. Only 10% reported the incident to an authority (law enforcement, Internet service provider, etc.) This increased to 18% when the solicitation was aggressive. The rest reported to parents, friends or siblings.

The following speculations were made about why kids did not report solicitations:

- ◆ they were not alarmed
- ◆ they didn't know or doubted anyone could help
- ◆ they were embarrassed/ashamed
- ◆ they feared losing computer privileges
- ◆ they accepted it as part of the Internet experience

Major findings and conclusions

- ◆ A large fraction of youth are encountering offensive experiences on the Internet.
- ◆ The offenses and offenders are even more diverse than we previously thought.
- ◆ Most sexual solicitations fail, but their quantity is potentially alarming.
- ◆ The primary vulnerable population is teenagers.
- ◆ Sexual material is very intrusive on the Internet.
- ◆ Most youth brush off these offenses, but some are quite distressed.
- ◆ Many youth do not tell anyone.
- ◆ Youth and parents do not report these experiences and do not know where to report them.
- ◆ Internet friendships between teens and adults are not uncommon and seem to be mostly benign.
- ◆ We still know little about the incidence of traveler cases (where adults or youth travel to physically meet and have sex with someone they first came to know on the Internet) or any completed Internet seduction and Internet sexual exploitation cases including trafficking in child pornography.

- ◆ Nothing in the survey should dampen enthusiasm about the potential of the Internet.

--From *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth: 2000*

What can we do?

Security measures and law enforcement are an important when the law has been broken, but as the Online Victimization report indicated, frequently the online incidents resemble "the hallways of our high schools" and laws aren't necessarily being broken.

We can empower girls by teaching them the skills they need to navigate the "halls" of the Internet. Assertiveness and confidence make girls an unappealing target to a would-be predator, whether online or not.

How can we do it?

Validate the relationships. They are paramount to girls, including relationships they form online. Open the door to discussing on line relationships by taking them seriously. If they know you see the relationship as "real", they will be more willing to listen and talk about it.

Realize that "Just Say No" to the Internet is not enough.

Assertiveness is just one of the skills to teach girls that will effect all of their relationships. Guilt-free, unapologetic and compassionate assertiveness is invaluable. Her ability to defend herself against online predators will be only one of the benefits. The confidence she gains will have a ripple effect in all that she does.

Websites for girls

- <gurlpages.com> - create a free webpage
- <teenrelationships.org> - trained teens available to talk to other teens about relationships
- <cybergrrl.com> - variety
- <teenvoices.com> - by girls for girls
- <newmoon.org> - girls' magazine

List of websites by girls for girls and by adults about girls

- <research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/links_girls.html>

Communication Style Activity

Here's an activity you can do with a group or individual girl(s) to work on assertiveness.

Communication Styles

Passive———Assertive———Aggressive

Passive-Aggressive

Step 1. Discuss how these forms of communication fall on a continuum with passive-aggressive communication turning the continuum into a triangle.

Step 2. Gather answers from the group/individual about how each style of communication might look in practice. (e.g. what does a person who is passive act like?)

Step 3. Have them place themselves on the continuum/triangle. What kind of communicator do they perceive themselves to be?

Step 4. Ask participants what kind of animal, plant, etc. each type of communication resembles. Use the metaphors any time you mention that type of communication.

Utilizing the groups' creativity rather than having pre-determined images gets them involved. Their "ownership" of the metaphors increases their investment in and understanding of the concept of assertiveness and other forms of communication.

Example of completed communication styles group exercise

In a small group exercise, participants determined the following metaphors:

Passive = doormat

Passive/Aggressive = weed/ivy

Aggressive = bear

Assertive = shrub

Following the activity/discussion, this group incorporated the metaphors daily. They described the shrub as compact enough that it did not keep light from the other plants in the forest. The shrub was unpleasant to sit on because it was prickly. If it was sat on, it perked right back up because it was strong underneath and its roots were strong enough to withstand the weeds that tried to tangle them up.

These were just some of the concepts they produced. The shrub metaphor in particular was brought up for weeks after the activity was completed. When the girls would talk to each other about needing to be assertive in a given situation they would say, "Be A Shrub!".

Once the girl(s) have decided on a metaphor, use that as a jumping off point to create further activities based on their metaphors.

**Mark Your Calendars
Whispers & Screams Chapter 7
"Peace for Girls"
May 1 & 2, 2003
Gateway Center, Ames, Iowa**

Do you have a Service Provider, Administrator, Policy Maker or Young Woman that you want to recognize? Consider nominating them for the Courageous Advocacy Award.

Details available now on-line: www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls

The Girl Connection is provided as a service of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force, coordinated by the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women, Department of Human Rights.

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For back issues of *The Girl Connection*, more information about the Gender-Specific Services Task Force, or if you are willing to receive future issues via e-mail to save mailing costs, please contact us:

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