

**A MUST READ FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH INTERNET ACCESS**

# **Who's chatting to your kids?**



**To report information anonymously to police  
call Crime Stoppers 1800 333 000**

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# Who's chatting

## to your kids?

The internet has brought the world into our living rooms providing access to vast resources of information and the opportunity to meet and communicate with people from around the world.

But like every element of society, the internet has its share of dangers and risks. The internet and advances in technology have been embraced by sex offenders who have proven exceptionally skilled at exploiting new modes of communication to gain access to children.

Like when learning to cross the street, it is important that we take the time to guide, assist and supervise our children in the use of the internet.

The rules you teach your children about meeting new people in the

real world also apply when they meet and 'chat' with people online.

Consider for a moment whether you would feel comfortable if your child spoke to a total stranger on the street for several hours or if the phone rang at home and your child told an unknown caller all about themselves, including their age, address, school or mobile phone number. Just as you would tell your children to never provide their personal details to someone they met on the street, you should tell them never to give them to anyone online.

This brochure provides you with practical information about internet safety, including the technology being used by children and how you can reduce the risk of your child becoming a victim.

# Social

# Networking

Social networking on the internet allows individual users to meet and connect with other users from around the world. Recently there has been a dramatic increase in their popularity with children due to the ease with which to share videos, photos, personal messages and chat in real time with others.

Children feel safe using the internet. If they are chatting to people they know (or think they know) and trust while in the safety of their own home, they will often let down their guard or try new things if it seems popular with their friends.

Regardless of how safe they feel or how confident they are, there are people out there looking for ways to target children online. They listen to and empathise with children and the problems they face to build rapport with them. They make themselves aware of the latest music, movies, television shows and interests. Some attempt to lower a child's inhibitions by slowly introducing sexual context and content into their conversations, while others immediately engage in sexually explicit conversation. Some will seek a face-to-face meeting with your child.

## Social networking sites

Social networking sites are online communities, some with millions of members. Many of these sites contain a profile page where a child can post personal information including their name, age, location, photographs, contact details, email addresses and in some instances their sexual preference.

Quite often, multiple children are targeted by predators. In many cases they attempt to gain the child's trust by pretending to be the same age. Once they have access to one child, they have access to the child's list of contacts, introducing the offender to their friends who in turn introduce their friends.

As a parent, it is important to be aware that a child can be identified and located by a number of methods. This includes posting information such as:

- personal details made available via the internet (including on their social networking pages and on their friends pages)
- photos of themselves wearing clothing that may identify their membership of a club,



association or school or taken in front of an easily identifiable landmark

- identifying information that a child's friend has disclosed during conversations
- email address distribution lists (included on group emails).

### **Instant messaging (IM)**

Instant messaging is a program that can instantly send messages from one computer to another anywhere in the world. These programs let children chat one-on-one (or one-to-many) with family and friends on their 'buddy' or friends list in real time. They also allow you to send and receive files, photos, audio and video content.

Growing in popularity in recent times, instant messaging can facilitate web cam chats (see page 9) or make voice calls to other computers replacing the need for a telephone.

IM is very similar to using email or SMS messaging and many of the

same safety rules apply. A powerful communication tool, IM programs can be direct links between your child and online predators.

Some children believe that having large numbers of contacts or friends in their 'buddy' or friends list increases their social status. Investigators from the Queensland Police Service's Taskforce Argos (targeting online offenders) have identified children who have over 700 contacts in their buddy list, and in one investigation arrested five child sex offenders from one child's list.

It is important that your child personally knows everyone on their contact list prior to chatting with them. They should be able to tell you each person's real name and how they came to know them.

### **Online chat rooms**

These programs allow users to select a "room" based on a particular interest or topic of conversation and allows them to chat instantly with others (using both voice and text chat). Chat rooms have proven to be a dangerous destination for children in the past due to the large number of predators actively using them. Children's topics are often mixed in with adult conversation or topics (many unsuitable for children). These types of internet communication platforms should be avoided by children or strictly monitored by

parents due to the high degree of risk associated with them.

Be aware that it is easy for predators to pretend they are children by creating a child's profile and building rapport during chat with your child. The predator will then request the child transfer to an instant messaging application in order for them to web cam, swap pictures and continue the grooming process.

### **3D interactive communities**

These types of internet platforms allow users to create three dimensional (3D) characters of their choice known as 'avatars'. They can interact as that character in a virtual world with thousands of other 'avatars' created by users from around the globe.

The risks associated with these sites include:

- Users cannot be sure of who they are interacting with (actual identities, ages, genders, etc)
- Adult predators can disguise themselves as child characters to communicate with children
- There is the potential for children to view sexually explicit material.

Speak with your child about the risks associated with representing themselves online. If your child creates a child avatar, they increase their chances of being targeted by predators.

### **Tips for parents with children engaged in social networking:**

- Choose a non identifiable, non gender specific username
- Never give out any personal information whilst using IM or other networking programs. This includes their real name, telephone or mobile phone number, mailing address, passwords or banking details
- Never accept a friend, file or download from a person you don't know, this includes links to a website
- Know how to save copies of your child's IM conversations.

# Mobile Phones

Today many children are provided with mobile phones by parents as a way of maintaining contact in emergency situations.

Internet predators are constantly looking for ways to facilitate direct contact with children and on many occasions obtain children's mobile phone numbers during online chats with them. They will search the internet for children's profiles containing a mobile telephone number or personal information.

Child sex offenders have been known to send mobile telephones to children as gifts. This gesture is part of the grooming process, and can result in the child feeling indebted to the predator. In some cases, they have paid the child's telephone bills

to ensure that communication can continue without the knowledge of the child's parents.

Of significant concern are the next generation mobile telephones that include features such as satellite navigation, web access, video and still cameras and GPS (global positioning system) location capability.

## Sexting

A concerning new development is the activity called 'sexting'. This involves children using their mobile phones to take and send sexually explicit images of themselves to their friends or to other people. This practice has increased in recent times due to improvements in the technology of mobile phones which now contain camera and video capability.

Of significant concern is the material they post or send can be very easily and widely circulated, of which the originator has no control. The images can be sent to other people from the child's school, sporting club or employer and be potentially embarrassing to them and their families in the future. Once this material has been circulated and made available on the internet, it is impossible to remove.



Children should be made aware that they are committing serious criminal offences by taking, possessing or sending these types of images and may be liable to prosecution.

### **Tips for parents of children with mobile phones:**

- Choose a mobile phone for your child that does not feature internet access, or alternatively speak with your carrier to block internet access. All carriers provide this service
- Talk to your carrier about blocking services that are not required on your child's phone. While GPS and other features can be useful, consider the implications of a complete stranger being able to pinpoint the exact location of your child. Blocking or restricting services can include the opportunity to limit incoming and outgoing calls, text, instant messaging and picture messages
- Monitor your child's telephone usage and be wary of gifts your child receives from unfamiliar people, particularly mobile phones
- Consider setting strict guidelines regarding your child's use of the phone. For example, advise your

child to use the mobile phone for emergencies and calls to home only

- Consider purchasing a pre-paid SIM card (available from your carrier) that strictly limits the use of the phone – once the limit is reached the phone card needs to be re-charged with credit
- Talk to your child about the appropriate use of camera phones. If your child has a camera phone then it is important you set some guidelines for its use, including when taking photos of others. Ask your child to let you know if anyone else's use of a camera phone makes them feel uncomfortable
- Stress the importance of not responding to any messages from unknown people. If your child receives persistent calls or messages from an unknown person, you should report it to the police, taking note of the number and saving any messages or pictures on the mobile handset.



# Web Cameras

Web cameras (web cams) can be connected to almost any home computer. They are regularly used to capture and send images or live video stream whilst chatting to other internet users. If operated appropriately, they are a great way to stay in contact with family and friends.

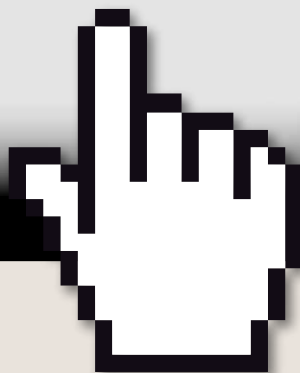
It is important to understand that web cams can take on a variety of forms. Technological advances have enabled many other devices to be used for this purpose, including digital cameras, phones or gaming devices connected to gaming consoles. Some of the latest generation of laptops have web cams built into the monitor screen.

Predators seek out and chat to children with web cams and can place enormous pressure on them

(even blackmail them) to transmit indecent images of themselves. It is also very common for predators to use web cameras to transmit images of themselves performing sex acts.

Once a child has transmitted an indecent image across the internet, that image can be saved or uploaded to the internet for public viewing. It is all but impossible to remove the image as it can be copied and downloaded often hundreds of thousands of times.

Parents should carefully consider the implications of allowing their children to have unsupervised access to web cameras.



# Online Gaming

The popularity of electronic and video games amongst children has increased dramatically over the last few years. Advances in technology have meant these devices can be used for a variety of purposes. Parents should be aware that many gaming devices can now connect to the internet or feature built-in web cameras. Some devices even provide online chat capability enabling anyone (including predators) to communicate with your child.

Predators have been known to pretend to be a child in order to game and then chat with your

child. Once a friendship has been established, they can request to take the conversation to another internet chat or networking site.

You should investigate what internet/chat capabilities your child's devices have and decide whether they require these facilities. It is your decision whether to set the available electronic parental controls on these devices or to disconnect these capabilities.



# Signs your child

# could be at risk

## **You find pornography on your child's computer.**

Child sex offenders may use pornography as part of the process to facilitate open sexual discussion. It may also be used to show the child that sex between children and adults is acceptable and normal.

## **Your child is receiving phone calls from people you don't know or is calling numbers you don't recognise.**

It is very common for a child sex offender to attempt to speak directly to a child they have met online. Investigations to date have proven that most want to talk to the child on the telephone for the purpose of setting up an actual meeting. While your child may be hesitant to give out your home phone number, the sex offender will give out theirs. If you do

not have a silent number and your child calls, the offender can easily obtain your number using the 'caller ID' function on their telephone.

## **Your child is spending excessive amounts of time on the internet.**

The longer your child is online, the higher the likelihood that they will be approached inappropriately, or be exposed to objectionable material.

While exploring the internet can be a valuable experience, parents should consider monitoring the amount of time children spend online. Children are at greatest risk from online sexual predators in the evening, during weekends and on school holidays. Research by investigators at Task Force Argos has shown that some offenders are online for up to 16 hours at a time. Be aware that visitors to chat rooms are from across the world, not just Australia.

## **When you enter the room your child changes the screen or turns the computer off.**

If your child is engaged in inappropriate conversation or is looking at pornographic images it is likely that they will attempt to hide this from you.



**Your child is receiving gifts or mail from people you don't know.**

Child sex offenders use many strategies to gain the confidence and trust of a child. Investigations conducted by officers from Taskforce Argos have identified that some individuals gradually seduce children through the use of attention, affection and gifts. They will send letters and gifts as part of this process and some will pay for flights so the child can meet them.

**Your child is becoming withdrawn or displaying irregular personality characteristics.**

Child sex offenders are adept at gaining the confidence of children, providing your child with a sympathetic and comforting ear, and turning insignificant family problems into major issues in order to gain the affection of your child. Children may also become withdrawn after sexual victimisation.

With little or no parental supervision and a willing child, it is easier for predators to form strong relationships with children online. Police have observed occasions when children



claim they are 'in love' with the predator, even after the predators true age is revealed.

It is important for parents to note that some children do actively seek and participate in sexually explicit conversation and have on occasions voluntarily met with the adult predator to engage in sexual contact.

# Suggestions

## to help protect your child on the internet

- Having **direct and open communication** with your child, taking the time to sit down with them and discussing their use of the internet is the most important step to protecting them online. Having open lines of communication allows your child to talk to you freely and approach you when something is wrong.
- Be **aware of the programs and files on your computer**. If you don't feel you have the knowledge or technical ability to do this, ask a friend, colleague or qualified technician.
- Spend time exploring the internet with your children, and **let them teach you about their favourite web sites**, including the social networking and instant messaging sites they use.
- Take the time to view your child's online profile and **check for information that may be unsafe**, including email addresses, information about their membership of any other networking sites, unacceptable photos or any other information of concern.
- Keep the computer in a room the whole family accesses, not in your child's bedroom. Opportunities for exploitation by a sexual predator are limited if the **computer monitor is visible to all members of the family**.
- Taskforce Argos has developed the "Family Internet Safety Agreement", a contract you agree upon with your child. The document sets out **agreed rules of internet use** with your child and is available at the back of this booklet and on the Queensland Police Service website ([www.police.qld.gov.au](http://www.police.qld.gov.au)). If this does not meet your needs, sit down with your family and develop your own set of guidelines.

- Consider installing **filtering and/or computer blocking software** provided by your internet service provider. The Netaalert web page (a Government run organisation) provides information on a number of commercially available products ([www.netaalert.gov.au](http://www.netaalert.gov.au)).
- Ensure you are able to **access your child's email** and randomly check its contents. Remember they may also be a member of free email accounts other than the one provided by your internet service provider.
- Consider **approaching your telephone service provider** to discuss options they may be able to provide to ensure your privacy and security.
- It is important to remember your child may be accessing the internet from other locations. Enquire with your child's school, public library or anywhere you believe your child uses the internet to **ascertain what safety measures they have in place**.

Important points to discuss with your children:

- Do not send pictures of themselves to someone they don't know and never place a full profile and picture of themselves anywhere on the internet
- Never give out personal information including their name, home address, phone number or school
- Never arrange a face to face meeting with someone they have only engaged with on the internet.

**If any of the following situations occur, you should immediately contact your local police station:**

- Your child or anyone in the household has received child exploitation material
- Your child has been sexually solicited
- Your child has received sexually explicit images.

If any of these scenarios occur, keep your computer turned off in order to preserve evidence.

**Remember,**

**ultimately your child's  
safety rests with you.**

# A must read for parents of children with internet access

To report information to police call  
Crime Stoppers 1800 333 000

Queensland Police Service  
Telephone 3364 6464

Task Force Argos, State Crime Operations Command  
Telephone 3364 4142

Life threatening emergencies  
or crime in progress call Triple Zero (000)

[www.police.qld.gov.au](http://www.police.qld.gov.au)

For further information on how to enjoy the internet safely visit the Australian Communications and Media Authority web site <http://www.cybersmart.gov.au> and The Australian Internet Safety Advisory Board web site <http://www.netalert.gov.au>.

*Supported by the Community Safety and Crime Prevention Branch, Operations Support Command.*



## **QPS Vision Statement**

We are determined to be a professional police service, dedicated to excellence and committed to working in partnership with the people of Queensland to enhance the safety and security of our community.



**Queensland  
Government**