DANGER INTERNET!

TIPS FOR PARENTS

We all worry about our children. Many of us are particularly worried about our children's use of the Internet. It is a world that they are more familiar with and know much more about than many parents do. Fortunately, we do not have to become tech wizards to be able to offer our children effective guidance and supervision about the Internet. If we can learn about the risks in the online world and how we can be effective in helping our children to avoid those risks, we are likely to make a positive contribution to their safety.

What are the risks?

There are four primary risks: sexual predators; harrassment ("cyber bullying"); identification theft; and computer viruses. Our focus here is on Internet activity that places children at risk of sexual abuse.

Studies indicate that most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men seeking to meet and seduce teenagers. (Statutory rape comprises 25% of the sex crimes against minors reported to police. Internet-initiated sex crimes comprise about 7% of all statutory rapes.)

The approach of an adult using the Internet to access children does not begin abruptly. Sex is usually brought up casually in an online conversation that takes place in a "chatroom." Chatrooms are a common place in which predators seek potential victims. Young persons who have problems with parents, experience frequent sadness and loneliness, or have histories of sexual abuse are more vulnerable to predators who may be lurking in a chatroom.

Parents need to know if their children are using "chatrooms" or other forms of Internet messaging.

In general, girls are more at risk than boys on the Internet. This is especially so for girls who are experimenting sexually. Boys who identify themselves as gay or who are confused about their sexual orientation are also vulnerable.

Giving personal information to an unknown person places a young Internet user at risk. Young persons who share personal information with unknown persons over the Internet and who are willing to arrange meetings with them are most at risk.

Uploading or downloading images using file-sharing programs is risky Internet activity.

Not surprisingly, posting provocative pictures increases the likelihood that a young person will receive a sexual solicitation. Those pictures also are downloaded and circulated by others.

Perpetrators not only seek provocative pictures, they may ask youths to take and post such pictures of themselves or friends. They can be used or even sold for pornography.

Older teenage victims and perpetrators sometimes collude to create secrecy and isolation. Few youths have the mature judgment and emotional self-regulation to engage in such relationships safely.

Young persons who are victimized may not report to parents or police because they may not view the actions as criminal or themselves as victims. Some youthful victims will feel love and allegiance toward offenders and victimized by authorities and parents. Victims may be pressured not to say anything or feel intimated by threats or fears.

Here are some tips for parents who want to keep their children safe from Internet sex predators:

• Make your number one priority having a relationship with your children that encourages them to speak to you about what troubles them.

• Involve yourself in your child's life. Ask questions and listen to the answers.

• Set some basic rules about using the computer – how much time and when.

• Talk about respecting their privacy when they use the computer. Talk about the difference between appropriate privacy and potentially harmful secrecy.

• Come to a mutual understanding about the content of their "personal" pages on the Internet (Facebook, etc.)

• Talk about the dangers of the Internet such as sharing personal information, discussing sex online or sharing provocative pictures.

• Talk about what they would do in certain situations, such as, "What if someone you've been talking to in a chatroom wants you to send a photo of yourself?"

• Encourage discussion about Internet safety for your children in religious education, youth groups or health classes that naturally address proper and healthy behavior.

• Take advantage of opportunities at your parish or your child's school to learn more about Internet safety.

• Visit these Web sites for more information:

www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm
www.azag.gov/children_family/InternetSafety.pdf
www.netsmartz.org
www.GetNetWise.org
www.internetsafety.com
www.netsmartz.org