



Online Predation by the School Internet Safety Initiative

What is it? A unique feature of the Internet is that it has removed many barriers, allowing adults to interact and have online conversations with minors (children under the age of 18). Sometimes these interactions are harmless, but other times these interactions can have negative consequences. Online predators have the anonymity of the Internet on their side. This means that they often conceal their physical appearance, age, and gender behind the shield of a digital screen.¹ Online predators no longer have to go to great measures to blend into society and roam freely through cyberspace searching for people to target and creating relationships with those chosen victim(s).

How is it done? Online predators are typically male, are the first to initiate or start contact, work diligently to build a close relationship, and desensitize (or slowly gain the trust of) their victim(s).^{2,3,4} *Grooming* is a term used to describe the carefully planned luring of victims by online predators with the end-goal of establishing offline contact (meeting in real life). It usually begins with contacting a minor in an online environment, establishing a relationship with either subtle or direct comments, building trust, sharing secrets to make a minor feel important⁵, and, sometimes, sending them regular mail, money, or gifts (after finding out the victim's home address).⁶ Often, predators *troll*, or purposely look for, potential victims in chat rooms or online bulletin boards and locate personal information in social networking sites and blogs.^{7,8,9}

Predators target specific victims. Predators tend to exploit (or use) an adolescent's natural curiosity about physical relationships, vulnerabilities, and desires for romance or friendship and intentionally disguise their real objectives and identities. A victim may be well aware of a large age difference, but have formed a close online attachment to the adult, hold unrealistic ideals of romance, and willingly agree to participate in an encounter offline.

Predators tend to look for these personality characteristics or traits in their victims¹⁰:

- Neediness or willingness to chat openly
- Typically of the female gender
- Openness or interest in talking about physical relationships
- Frequently uses the Internet (e.g., spends a lot of time in chat rooms or Instant Messaging)

¹ McGrath, M. G., & Casey, E. (2002). Forensic psychiatry and the Internet: Practical perspectives on sexual predators and obsessional harassers in cyberspace. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 30, 81–93.

² Deirmenjian, J. M. (2002). Pedophilia on the Internet. *Journal of Forensic Science*, 47(5), 1–3.

³ Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., & Mitchell, K. J. (2008). Online "predators" and their victims. *American Psychologist*, Feb-Mar 2008, 111–127.

⁴ Dombrowski, S. C., LeMasney, J. W., Ahia, C. E., & Dickson, S. A. (2004). Protecting children from online sexual predators: Technological, psychoeducational, and legal considerations. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(1), 65–73.

⁵ Deirmenjian, J. M. (2002). Pedophilia on the Internet. *Journal of Forensic Science*, 47(5), 1–3.


⁶ Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., & Wolak, J. (2007). Youth Internet users at risk for the most serious online sexual solicitations. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 32(6), 532–537.

⁷ Malesky, L. A., Jr. (2007). Predatory online behavior: Modus operandi of convicted sex offenders in identifying potential victims and contacting minors over the Internet. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 16(2), 23–32.

⁸ Marcum, C. D. (2007). Interpreting the intentions of Internet Predators: An examination of online predatory behavior. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 16(4).

⁹ Noll, J. G., Shenk, C. E., Barnes, J. E., & Putnam, F. W. (2009). Childhood abuse, Avatar choices, and other risk factors associated with Internet-initiated victimization of adolescent girls. *Pediatrics*, 123(6).

¹⁰ Dowell, E. B., Burgess, A. W., & Cavanaugh, D. J. (2009). Clustering of Internet risk behaviors in a middle school student population. *Journal of School Health*, 79(11), 547–553.

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- Uses flirty usernames, pictures, or provocative avatars (online likenesses)
 - Has mostly unsupervised Internet use
 - Tends to reveal a lot of personal information in their online content (e.g., blogs, social network posts, etc.)

For more information and to learn how to protect yourself from online predators, check out these suggested readings and resources:

- FBI publication: *A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety*
<https://www.fbi.gov/resources/parents>
- NetSmartz Workshop: *Predators* <http://www.netsmartz.org/Predators>
- Enough is Enough: *Internet Safety 101 – Predators*
<http://internetsafety101.org/internetpredators>
- Kid Power: *Four Strategies for Protecting Kids from Sexual Predators*
<http://www.kidpower.org/library/article/protecting-kids-from-sexual-predators/>