

Internet Safety

By

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I never knew either of my grandfathers. My great uncle filled the role for me. I called him Uncle Joe. My Uncle Joe died a couple of years ago. He was 95 years old. He grew up dirt poor on a farm in the Midwest. He told me how, during the Great Depression, his family would be forced to burn cow dung in the stove just to stay warm in the winter. He then got a job cutting redwood trees in the Pacific Northwest. After Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He served on a battleship in the Philippines during World War II. Even up to his death, Uncle Joe always had his wits about him. It was in his nature to learn all he could. His massive library and piles of writings did not seem to fit a man who never even stepped foot into a high school.

I saw him frequently when I was younger. One time in particular has always stuck with me. I came home to find him sitting at the family computer. The computer was not logged in (as it required a password.) This did not stop him from gazing at the screen. He was moving the mouse to the corners of the screen. He picked up the mouse and moved the swiveling ball with his thumb and watched as the arrow on the screen moved. He asked me if I could explain how the computer worked and even what people used them for.

I realized that he could not have possibly comprehended what he was asking. In his day, people didn't buy things that they did not understand. He would ask: well, then, how could you fix it if it breaks? Do any of us *really* understand how a computer or the

Internet works? How could I explain the concept of the Internet to a man who was fascinated by a mouse? To him, a mouse was something you tried to kill with a trap. A virus was something that killed you. A crash was a tragedy that you didn't even talk about. A hard drive was a long drive on a hot day, and the web was the intricate workings of a spider that lived on the porch.

It was sad to think that a man who suffered through the worst economy in the nation's history, and who fought in the bloodiest war of all time, was so thrown off by something that today's children use before they can ride a bike. He gave up trying to learn it after only a few minutes. His camera, the kind that could instantly print Polaroids, was enough technology for him.

The power of the Internet is a force that most young people take for granted. I doubt that the people who designed the first computer could have anticipated how dramatically it would "connect" the world.

Most people have a Facebook account these days. On Facebook, anyone can discover your name and the town where you live, even what you look like. Even if you do not accept a "friend request" and have set some privacy filters, almost anyone with access to the Internet can see a picture of you, figure out your home town, see who your friends are, if you have any pets, and even send you a message. The most dangerous aspect of this is that some people may not be as honest as you. That's a serious danger for everyone, but especially for the young

In my Uncle Joe's day, predators would stalk playgrounds, schoolyards, and city streets. Predators had to risk going out, being in public, being more likely to be caught in order to try to snatch a child. Today, predators can access you from the safety of their own

living room.

Say that I am a freshman in high school...

On Facebook, I get a “friend request” from Jane Smith. I know Jane well; rather, I know “of” Jane well. She is a senior in my high school, and she is the prettiest one. Her “profile picture” is of her with the varsity cheer squad.

I assume that Jane noticed me in passing periods or in the cafeteria. I think to myself, it's about time! Imagine what my friends will say when they hear that I'm friends with Jane Smith! Hungrily, I accept her friend request. As I am pondering what to post on her wall or if I should message her, she messages me!

She says she has had a crush on me since she first saw me.

Obviously...

She mentions that she knows some of my friends, and they all tell her how smart and cool I am. And that I have the coolest friends in school.

Duh...

She says that she has been too nervous to talk to me until now.

My curse...

She says that she is throwing a party tonight, and all of her senior friends really hope that I can make it.

My life is complete: I get to be a VIP at a senior party!

She tells me her car is broken, but her dad can pick me up tonight on his way home from work. She lets me know that there might be drinking at the party, so I probably shouldn't tell my parents where I'm going, for my own sake. She's so smart. I should

expect her dad around eight.

I tell her where he can pick me up..

My first impulse is to brag to my friends, but I hesitate. I don't want them infiltrating the senior party. They might embarrass me or steal my thunder. I strum my fingers impatiently until eight, when I see my ride out front. I run downstairs and inform my parents that I'm going to the neighbor's house and that they can lock the door because I have my key. I leave as if heading to my neighbor's house, then I slip off towards the street and jump into the back seat of the waiting car. Mr. Smith seems nice; he tells me how much he's heard about me from Jane. We drive to a part of town I am not familiar with. I enter Jane's house expecting to see her smiling face and an entourage of high-schoolers.

There are none to be found....

In the hypothetical, what did I do wrong? It is impractical to ask students to not accept friend requests from peers. Using the Internet can be dangerous, so can driving, but that doesn't mean we should not use cars. But it also doesn't mean we should drive—or use the Internet—without taking safety into account. So where did I go wrong? First of all, I did not check to see who Jane's friends were. Had I done that, I would have noticed that she had barely any friends at all; that may have raised some red flags. Second, I noticed that her “profile picture” was a yearbook picture of her cheer squad. I should have realized that anyone could have had access to this picture from my school's website. These two things were minor compared to the big mistakes that young and hypothetical *me* made.

I had no evidence to verify that “Jane” was who she claimed to be. I never heard her voice or saw her. Flattery made me less critical. No one should ever meet anyone from an Internet chat in person unless they 100% know for sure that the person they are chatting with is the person they know and trust in real life. I also agreed to get into a car with a person I did not really know and to go to a location that I did not know. Perhaps the most crucial mistake I made was that I did not tell my parents what I was doing.

Had I been honest with my parents, they might have asked questions, making me realize how little I actually knew. At a minimum, telling my parents would have given them a chance to tell me that it was a school night and that I should not be going to a party. Parents can be surprising—at times even life-saving--with their insight.

The Internet predator is faceless and yet too often completely familiar; he or she can have the face of any boy or girl from your school. The Internet predator is ageless. If you do not see the person or hear the person’s voice directly, then you cannot know they are genuinely who they claim to be. The Internet predator is cunning. You cannot assume that someone on the Internet has not seen you before; they may be someone who has had their eye on you for years. It is not difficult to figure out someone’s parent's name. The Internet predator can claim to be a close family friend. The Internet predator can easily put the word “Officer” in front of an already false name. Predators, through messaging, can form a relationship with a child before they ever see the child in person. The Internet predator is flexible. No two predations need to be exactly alike. I just offered one example of how an Internet predator might trick a guy like me; there are as many examples as there are potential victims..

Internet predation is the most severe threat the internet presents, but it is not the

only, nor is it the most common. With the advent of the “smart phone” our social networking services can follow us anywhere. This means that our friends can follow us anywhere. Unfortunately, those whom we “confirm” as friends are not always our friends (even when we know for sure that they are who they claim to be.) One example of this is seen with cyber-bullying.

Determined bullies can get at their victims at anytime. Smart phones and other mobile media allow us to bully or be bullied from anywhere. S.A.V.E.'s flyer on cyberbullying describes cyberbullying as “the willful and repeated use of electronic means by a child, pre-teen, or teen to torment, threaten, harass, humiliate, embarrass or otherwise target another.” S.A.V.E.'s flyer offers ways to prevent cyberbullying from occurring at your school. The simplest to these is: don't cyberbully. Even repeating a hurtful message is cyberbullying. Don't “like” or positively comment on anything hurtful. Doing so gives the bully the validation that he or she is craving in the first place. The Golden Rule applies to the Internet as well as life: treat others as you would like to be treated. Even if the “trend” in your school is to cyberbully, don't be a part of it. Not even with friends who ven you think you're just “messing” with. You can hurt somebody and not even know it. And the pain inflicted by friends we trust sometimes hurts the most.

To avoid being the victim of cyberbullying, S.A.V.E. offer's some very good pieces of advice. First, “never respond to rude or harassing comments.” Face to face, it is hard to ignore a bully. At home, you have the luxury to truly ignore someone. A cyberbully can only hurt you as much as you allow them to. I would just forget about the remarks (assuming they don't cross the line into threats or criminality); I might even pity the cyberbully. If someone has to snipe insults from the safety of their own home, you

should feel bad for them. Remember, most perpetrators are also victims. But, of course, pitying a cyberbully—showing them empathy--does not mean that you are condoning their actions as acceptable.

Another good piece of advice that S.A.V.E. offers is to “think before posting any picture.” This is not only true for bullying, but also later in life. Things on the Internet never disappear for good. In ten years an employer may look you up on Google. That one stupid picture that might draw mean comments from your classmates in high school might also be the first thing to come up when a potential employers looks for you online..As I prepare to graduate from Ripon College next year, there are more than a few pictures on the Web that I wish I could delete from cyberspace, but it’s too late for that now for me. But not for you: you can prevent it by not posting them in the first place.

Remember my Uncle Joe? When he was your age, he would never have welcomed bullies or predators into his home. Doors and deadbolts do not mean as much as they used to. The Internet is unlikely to disappear, and that is a good thing. Like many things in life, if used responsibly and in moderation, the Internet is an amazing tool for all of us.