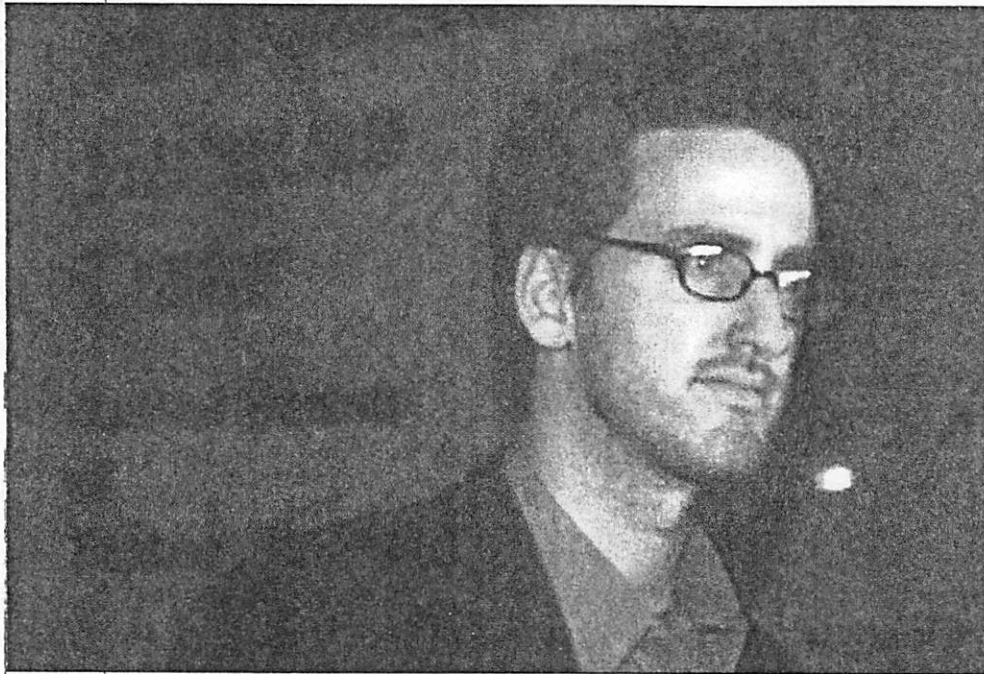


Pedophiles Prowl the Internet

By Catherine Edwards

Most parents approve of their kids' use of the computer, but many adults are unaware that pedophiles are surfing the Internet 24 hours a day, looking for underage prey.



REUTERS

Every day Donna becomes a crime victim. Willingly. She turns on her computer and logs onto the myriad of chat rooms and bulletin boards available on the Internet. Chat forums with names such as “beaniebabeez” are listed right alongside “young gurlz” and “m4mbarely legal” (the “m” stands for men). Instead of using her regular screen name she chooses names such as “susieq86” and “brat13.”

Posing as a 13-year-old, Donna does what many curious teens might do in her situation. She bypasses the “beaniebabeez” site and enters the “barely legal” site. Within seconds she

Busted: *Disney executive Naughton was charged with seeking sex with a 13-year-old girl via the Internet.*

is solicited for sex by older men — pedophilia, right in the comfort of her own home.

Accidentally or not, more than half of America’s teen-agers have come into contact with obscene material on the Internet. For the first time ever, pedophiles intent upon seduction can tour the world, entering children’s bedrooms at will.

Donna, who has asked that her last name remain confidential, happens to be a concerned parent and citizen activist who goes online posing as a

teen so she can help local law enforcement nab sex criminals. Now she works closely with local cops. Her first target to be convicted was not a dirty old man in a trench coat, but a prominent and well-respected school principal. The FBI tells *Insight* that the average online pedophile is a white male age 25 to 40 with no prior convictions.

The problem is serious. Donna tells *Insight* that “most parents don’t even know what a screen name is, but their kids do and that’s the danger.” Despite the best efforts of activists and law-enforcement officials to educate the public, many parents are unaware that their kids are viewing objectionable material and communicating regularly with people few would allow to cross the thresholds of their homes.

“I have worked on this issue for six years and my belief is that parents are still not understanding what the real dangers are to their children and families,” says another Donna — Donna Rice Hughes, author of *Kids Online* and senior adviser to *Familyclick.com*. “They are not taking the initiative to implement tools to protect their kids, so we have children falling through the cracks. Pedophiles and pornographers are exploiting technology for their advantage, and they are way ahead of parents.”

Internet technology has galloped ahead at a faster pace than the laws that regulate it. Law enforcement has been hard-pressed to keep up with the growing number of cybercrimes committed on a daily basis.

Take the Feds, for instance. The FBI set up an office in 1994 in New Calverton, Md., called Innocent Images. That office has a squad of 20 agents who go undercover online posing as children. The total number of staff in the Maryland office is more than 50, and Innocent Images now runs similar operations out of 10 field offices. Its annual budget is \$10 million.

These agents strike up conversations with men and women in chat rooms. Sometimes both parties pose as kids. Some pedophiles reveal their age and ask for sex outright. If a meeting is requested, the agent goes to the arranged meeting spot and the online friend finds himself face to face with the FBI. “These guys show up with film, cameras and vibrators in a bag,” says Special Agent Peter Gulotta. “We have evidence of their online conversations; it is not hard to convict them.” Agents undergo regular psychological testing to ensure they are not mentally disturbed by their online activi-

ty, which can last as long as 10 hours a day. The FBI keeps these assignments short.

The agents look for two types of criminals: transmitters and travelers. It is illegal to transmit child pornography over the Internet, and it also is illegal to travel across state lines to have sex with a minor. And it doesn't matter if the victim turns out not to be a minor when the pedophile gets there, explains Gulotta, the "traveling with intent" is crime enough. "We have no shortage of customers," he says, but many escape the net. In 1998 Innocent Images identified 702 instances of traveling or transmitting; in 1999, the number increased to 1,500. Since 1995 they've apprehended 478 people, with a 99 percent conviction rate.

Patrick Naughton, 34, a Disney executive on the West Coast, recently was charged with crossing state lines seeking sex with a 13-year-old girl after arranging to meet her via the Internet. Last December a jury convicted him of possessing child pornography; he faces trial again in March on the traveling charges.

Despite lack of specialized funding, some local prosecutors realize that they must be proactive in this area. Jeanine Ferris Pirro is the district attorney for Westchester County, N.Y. Elected as a Republican in 1994, she has made cybercrime detection a priority. Pirro established a unit to detect high-tech crimes and in late 1999 sought approval to convene a grand jury to seek indictments in these cases.

"Old crimes are being committed in new ways," Pirro tells *Insight*. "We used to tell our kids not to go to the park alone and not to talk to strangers. This is no different."

Despite paltry funding, Pirro's office has managed to convict 15 offenders for cybersex crimes during the last six months and boasts a 100 percent conviction rate. Like the Feds, the unit employs an undercover investigator who poses as a 14-year-old. "Sometimes it only takes two hours from actually logging on to the computer to the physical meeting," says Pirro. "These pedophiles are so desperate for sex with children they will do anything."

But most local law-enforcement offices lack even the equipment to detect cybercrime. "We are chasing the tail end of the problem," says Bob

Flores, a former prosecutor and Justice Department official. "We don't take care of people until they are jumping off the cliff," Pirro agrees. "If we're not careful, we'll be investigating [resulting] homicides."

Flores works at the National Law Center for the Protection of Children and Families in Fairfax, Va., and is fighting for prosecution of obscenity and child pornography. He says he is

in Littleton — except this time it would be a horrible sex crime performed by teens who were educated by graphic pornography on the Internet."

With the advent of the Internet, legislators realized that the obscenity laws already on the books had huge gaps and moved to update them. In 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the indecency provisions of the Communications Decency Act, or CDA, were unconstitutional under the First Amendment. If upheld, the CDA would have protected children on the Internet from indecent materials, as the federal law prohibits such material on the airwaves while allowing states and localities to regulate porn behind brown wrappers in shops. Instead, the burden of regulating Internet reception was put on parents and adult supervisors of children.

But parts of the CDA were upheld. For instance, the act included a provision that seeks to protect children from online pedophiles and stalkers. And the Child Online Protection Act, introduced by former Indiana senator Dan Coats, mandates that commercial pornographers require verification of would-be vendors as adults before selling them porn.

Chat rooms and sexually explicit material from overseas are especially difficult to regulate. Dennis Perry, a law-enforcement agent in Naples, Fla., confirms this. He spends 10 to 50 hours a week of his spare time alerting authorities to illegal sites. "Some of these pedophiles put up sites to lure kids in to them. Sites like the Treehouse Kids Club look innocent enough until you look a little closer and find out it is maintained by boy lovers," Perry says. "Most often when Internet service providers are made aware that they are supporting pedophilia, they shut [the sites] down. But most pedophiles just

set up sites overseas." So Perry writes the embassies. He says he chased one site from the United States to Germany and then Korea. It ended up being supported by a server in Russia, but he has had no reply from the Russian Embassy.

How harmful is pornography to children? The Cincinnati-based

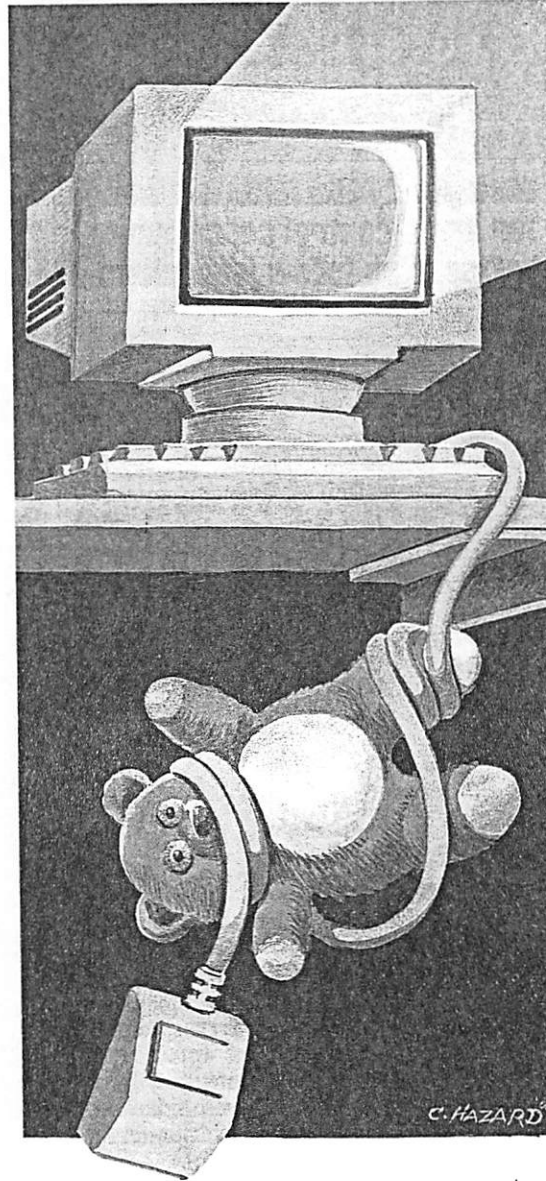


ILLUSTRATION BY C. HAZARD

frustrated that the Department of Justice has yet to convict even one person for online obscenity. "The Internet has become the sex-ed manual for the new millennium," he warns. "We saw the outcry after [the high-school shootings in Littleton, Colo., at] Columbine. Those kids learned to make bombs online. I am convinced that if we don't do something soon we will have a tragedy on the scale of what took place

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INTERNET PEDOPHILES

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National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families conducted a series of focus groups with teens in August 1998 in which 88 percent of males acknowledged that teens learn how to perform sex from porn. More than 70 percent of males and females agreed it is addictive. The coalition also found that 10 is the average age that children are being exposed to pornography.

"We think the Internet is a wonderful tool," explains coalition president Ray Schatz, and "we encourage people to use it, lest they be educationally deprived. But it is irresponsible not to talk about the dangers involved. It would be like telling someone about a beautiful woodland and not mentioning the grizzly bears inside."

Meanwhile, Internet-service giant America Online, or AOL, has background-checked staff monitoring every chat room it maintains. "We are designed as a family-friendly service," says AOL spokesman Rich d'Amato, "but parents must monitor what their kids do online." In other words, he says, parents must not use the Internet

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as an electronic baby-sitter, lest it turn out that the baby-sitter is a pedophile.

"The scariest thing," explains activist Donna, "is how pedophiles can follow you around online without you knowing it." She tells *Insight* about a young child whose mother died. In her grief this child visited a chat room for other children who had lost a parent. A pedophile added her to his "buddy list," an online identification service that enables users to monitor Internet activities of friends. The man took notes on what the child said not

only in that chat room but all the others she visited. After several weeks the pedophile contacted the child, posing as an Indian shaman who had made contact with her dead mother. Using his notes, he was able to pretend that he indeed was psychic and knew her thoughts. The little girl's excitement grew as the phony shaman recounted exactly what she had done the day before! Soon he lured her into a lesbian chat room and was forwarding her explicit material.

"People don't realize how dangerous it is for their kids," says Jo Ann, a mother who has helped authorities convict child molesters online. Her 11-year-old son has been molested, she explains. "I know what potential dangers there are for my kids and how this has destroyed my son." Her son now is terrified even to play on a baseball team, she says, lest his coach try to touch him. The family plans to move to another state "for a fresh start."

Gulotta of the FBI's Innocent Images program says he has been on the force for more than 30 years and has seen a lot but, when he refers to Internet pedophiles, his voice turns quiet and cold. "There is no more reprehensible a group than these people," he says. •

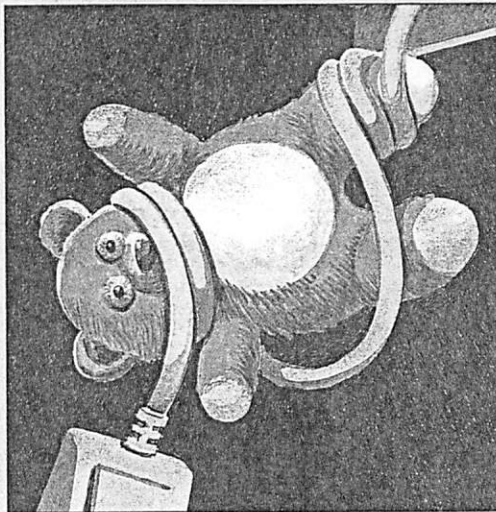
Underage Sex on the Internet

Are children really likely to be solicited for sex online? *Insight* decided to investigate and logged onto America Online, or AOL, under a screen name that made us appear to be a 13-year-old boy. We entered a Men for Men chat room and, before we could even figure out how the chat room worked, messages had popped up on the screen.

Right out of the gate, questions included: Are you really 13? Where do you live? What do you want to do? One sender said he was 18 and wanted to have sex, adding that he didn't care about age and would come by in his car at night.

"But what about my parents?" *Insight* typed. "Tell them you are going for a walk," he replied. When warned that there might be illegality involved in such a liaison, the man responded that he was aware of the age of consent but would add us to his buddy list anyway and hopefully keep in touch.

The same thing happened when we pretended to be a 13-year-old girl in the Guyz 4 Yonger Gurlz chat room. Before we logged off, the e-mail in the box of the screen name we had just created had received a swarm of porn sites.



Parents can educate themselves about Internet child pornography and learn what they can do about it at these sites:

- Information about protective software can be found at www.filtering-facts.org or www.kidshield.com.

- The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children keeps the latest information for protecting youngsters. Report sexually explicit images sent to or about a child to the cyber tipline at www.missingkids.com/cybertip, or call the police.

- A resource on how to keep kids safe online while allowing them to enjoy the benefits of the Internet is *Kids Online: Protecting Your Children in Cyberspace* by Donna Rice Hughes.

The following sites contain good advice about Internet safety and ways to implement the necessary tools for safe surfing:

- www.safeteens.com
- www.enough.org
- www.protectkids.com
- www.fbi.gov

- To find the latest federal legislation on this issue, go to <http://thomas.loc.gov>.

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