

# Survey: Fifth of youth solicited on sex online

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Nearly one in five youths surveyed who regularly use the Internet received an unwanted sexual solicitation online in the last year, according to a study published today in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

This suggests that "youth encounter a substantial number of offensive episodes as they navigate cyberspace," said Kimberly J. Mitchell, who wrote the study with David Finkelhor and Janis Wolak.

"Enough of these encounters threaten to spill over into real life that youth should be instructed how to minimize their risk," said Ms. Mitchell, who works at Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

The study was funded by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The federally funded center runs CyberTipline ([www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)), which collects reports of sexual exploitation of children.

Little scientific information exists about what happens to youth while they are online, said Ms. Mitchell and her colleagues.

They conducted a telephone survey of 1,501 youths between August 1999 and February 2000. The youths were between 10 and 17 years old and had used the Internet at least once a month for the last six months at home, in school, in the library or in someone else's home.

About 1,500 parents were also interviewed about their children's use of the Internet as well as their rules and concerns.

In the survey, the children were asked whether they had been asked to give personal sexual information, engage in sexual talk or engage in sexual activities by someone on the Internet. They were also asked if

anyone attempted to contact them by mail, telephone or in person.

Two hundred and eighty-six youths — or 19 percent — said they received at least one sexual solicitation while using the Internet in the past year, said Ms. Mitchell, who has a doctoral degree in psychology.

Some solicitations were "relatively benign," like questions about the child's underwear, said Ms. Mitchell.

But 43 youths, or 3 percent, were asked to make offline contact.

None of these youths was actually assaulted as a result of an Internet contact, but the requests were potentially dangerous, she said.

The solicitations were "almost always in chat rooms," said Ms. Mitchell, noting that only 10 percent of solicitations were reported to authorities.

Girls and older teens ages 14 to 17 were most likely to be solicited. Risks also grew if the children talked to strangers online, used the Internet at someone else's house, used the Internet at least eight hours a week, or had some kind of trouble at home, such as divorce, separation, unemployment or a death in the family.

The study found significant parental oversight: 84 percent of parents had rules about what not to do online, 81 percent asked their children about their online activities, 72 percent checked their children's Internet activities while they were online and 25 percent had filtering software to block unwanted Internet sites.

However, neither parental oversight nor blocking software was found to significantly lessen the risk of being solicited, said Ms. Mitchell.

"Young people who stay away from chat rooms and are cautious about corresponding with strangers on the Internet appear to be solicited at lower rates," the study said.