



# The new face of cybercrime

Children frequently utilize technology to prey on friends and classmates online

There's a new cyber enemy for parents to worry about. This new threat lurks not only in cyberspace but in the school yard, the classroom and even in the home.

An RIT study of more than 40,000 adolescents reveals that 59 percent of cyber victims in grades 7-9 say the perpetrators are a "friend" that they know personally. That perpetrator is also significantly more likely to be a fellow student than an adult.

"Most people have long thought the perpetrators of cybercrime to be some 'boogey man' holed up in his attic, searching the Internet for children to prey on," says Sam

McQuade, who led the research effort and is the graduate program coordinator in RIT's Center for Multidisciplinary Studies. "While that is certainly something to be feared, the startling new reality is today's children are most frequently preying on each other online – and their parents rarely have any idea it's happening."

McQuade's research aimed to determine the nature and extent of cybercrime abuse

and victimization by and among adolescents. The survey was administered to students in kindergarten through grade 12 in 14 school districts.

### From bullying to crime

Survey results indicate that cyber bullying – consisting of sending threatening and nasty messages – begins as early as the second grade, peaks in middle school and sometimes continues through high school. One in 10 second- and third-graders report having been “mean to someone” online, while one in five report that someone online has been “mean” to them.

“What has traditionally happened on the playground has now moved into cyberspace,” McQuade says. “The major difference is that children have a sense that they’re anonymous and invincible online. Therefore, they seem to lash out in ways that they may not in person.”

Children also are using the Internet and electronic devices to perpetrate unethical, socially deviant and even criminal acts. Online identity theft is prevalent, even with younger Internet users. Twelve percent of fourth through sixth graders report having experienced someone pretending to be them online and 13 percent report someone having their password or using their account without their permission.

Illegally downloading music and movies often begins in the fourth grade, as 8 percent of fourth-through-sixth graders admit to the act. Meanwhile, 65 percent of 10<sup>th</sup>-through-12<sup>th</sup> graders admit to having illegally downloaded music in the past year, with 34 percent admitting to illegally downloading movies.

The research has serious repercussions for the classroom as well. Twenty-one percent of 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders admitted using a computer or electronic device to cheat on a school assignment within the last school year. Twelve percent admitted using technology to commit plagiarism and 9 percent admit using an electronic device to cheat on an exam.

### Dangerous and disturbing

Youngsters frequently come in contact with content that may be sexually oriented. Forty-eight percent of kindergarteners and first-graders reported viewing online content that made them feel uncomfortable. One in four students did not report the incident to a grownup.

Survey questions varied depending on the age group. Therefore, older students revealed more specific information. Of the seventh through ninth graders surveyed,

## Keeping children safe online: Tips for parents

An RIT study reveals that a high percentage of cybercrimes against children are committed by other children. The perpetrator is also significantly more likely to be a fellow student than an adult.

There are some basic steps parents can take to help protect their children against Internet dangers. The Cyber Safety and Ethics Initiative offers the following tips for parents to help keep their children safe online:

- Keep your computer in a common area of your home, such as the family room.
- Monitor your children's Internet habits and ask them to show you Web sites they visit.
- Talk to your children about cyber ethics. Remind them that bullying, cheating and illegally downloading music, movies and software are wrong.
- Develop an “Internet usage contract” for your children and sign it.
- Review your children's instant messenger profiles and messages, in addition to their social networking profiles on sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Periodically take a look at the profiles of their friends as well.
- Set time limits on Internet usage.
- Know your children's friends – online as well as in person.
- Stress Internet “stranger danger.”
- Do a “Google” search for your children's names to make sure that their personal information and photos are not easily searchable on the Internet.

The Cyber Safety and Ethics Initiative is a partnership between Rochester Institute of Technology, more than 20 Rochester area school districts, Time Warner Cable, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Information Systems Security Association and InfraGard Member Alliance of Rochester, a program of the Federal Bureau of Investigations.

For more Internet safety tips for children, parents, educators and businesses, visit The Cyber Safety and Ethics Initiative Web site at [www.bcybersafe.org](http://www.bcybersafe.org).

14 percent reported they had communicated online about sexual things. Eight percent had been exposed to nude pictures and 7 percent had been asked to reveal nude pictures of themselves online.

Within the past year, 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders indicated that they used the Internet to interact with strangers in a variety of ways, including chatting (48 percent), flirting (25 percent), providing personal information (22 percent), talking about private things (17 percent) and engaging in sexually oriented chat (15 percent).

McQuade attributes much of the research data to the fact that many young people are more technologically astute than their parents and teachers.

“Kids today grow up with this technology and are knowledgeable about it in ways that many of their parents and teachers simply are not,” McQuade says.

That's why McQuade and RIT have joined with more than 20 Rochester area school districts, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Time Warner Cable, the Information Systems Security Association and the InfraGard Member Alliance to form The Cyber Safety and Ethics Initiative. The



Sam McQuade

goal of the initiative is to utilize the survey results to determine a comprehensive, community-wide approach to tackling this increasing problem.

“This is not a problem that can be solved by parents and educators

alone,” McQuade says. “This is a societal problem that requires a societal solution. That's why The Cyber Safety and Ethics Initiative is comprised of representatives from higher education, K-12 education, community groups and members of the business community. We all need to work together.”

John Follaco

#### Web extra:

For more information about the study as well as information for children, parents, educators and businesses, visit The Cyber Safety and Ethics Initiative Web site at [www.bcybersafe.org](http://www.bcybersafe.org).