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Save children from predators lurking in cyberspace

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Guest essayist

Most parents and educators understand and accept, if not embrace, computerized technology as a way of providing for the safety and accountability of their kids and as a means of enhancing their education in and out of school.

However, parents and teachers who are concerned about the dangers of the Internet but who have not grown up with computers are often technologically inept compared with their children, and are unaware of their networking activities, as well as effective ways to intercede when necessary.

Ironically, while U.S. schools promote the use of computers, the Internet and other information technology devices to enhance education, they do not incorporate Internet safety, information security and cyber ethics instruction into lesson plans and curricula.

This must change.

Cybercrime offenders live on technology's cutting edge. In a technological chess match, they'll outmaneuver us every time. Meanwhile, curious, defiant and technologically savvy kids quickly learn from each other how to defeat Internet filtering software that parents feel good about installing on home computers and that Internet service providers increasingly market in order to make the Internet "safer for kids."

Twenty percent of children ages 10 to 17 are sexually solicited over the Internet each year. Technology can only do so much to help combat that threat. The best way to remedy this problem is through our classrooms.

Children are incurring unnecessary risks for themselves, their friends and family members as a result of posting personal information onto social networking Web sites. And children are not just victims — they're often offenders.

Adolescents are increasingly learning from each other how to use increasingly affordable gadgets such as handheld computers, cell phones, PDAs, MP3 players and other devices in ways that can be harmful.

Rochester Institute of Technology is teaming with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Information Systems Security Association, Infragard and more than 20 area school districts, including the Diocese of Rochester Catholic Schools, to conduct research designed to determine the nature and extent of cyber-offending and victimization by and among primary and secondary school students. We then hope to determine how best to implement cyberinformation, safety and ethics instruction into curricula.

Similar education initiatives must begin to take place throughout the country.

We've done a magnificent job in our homes and classrooms educating our children about "stranger danger." Almost all children know not to accept rides or candy from strangers.

But times have changed. Child predators, masquerading as anything they choose, can sit at a computer, select their target, collect information and then strike with relative ease.

Technology and law enforcement can only do so much to stop this. It's up to educators to do the rest.

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