

What You Need to Know about Chat Rooms and Instant Messaging Just the Facts!



Chat Room and Instant Messaging Safety

Have you ever been in a room full of people talking about the latest diet or local news? Everyone takes part in the conversation—bringing their experience, opinions, questions, or general knowledge to it. Chat rooms and instant messaging work the same way, except that the discussions take place online—real-time text conversations with other people.

Most people visit chat rooms to discuss topics they are interested in or to meet other people. Chat room audiences can come from diverse age groups and backgrounds, on topics as varied as poodles, postage stamps, or pop music.

Instant messaging (“IM”) is similar to chat, except that conversations are one on one. People may meet in a chat room and then move to instant messaging later for more private conversations. Sending text messages (“texting”) between cell phones is also popular with teens. Advancing technology now permits these messages to go from cell phone to computer, or vice versa.

All these activities can be perfectly safe at appropriate age levels, with a little care. However, you should be aware of certain areas to ensure the security of your computer and your kids.

Crossword Story

Aida is a 13-year-old girl who loves dolphins. She enjoys searching for information on dolphins on the Internet and loves joining chat rooms that discuss them. While using a particular chat room, she began talking with a 14-year-old girl named Olivia. Olivia shared Aida’s passion for dolphins, as she kept pictures and books of dolphins in her room as well. In addition, Olivia had actually been to Sea World three times and swam with dolphins once. This fascinated Aida, and she soon developed an online friendship with Olivia.

Olivia later asked Aida to use instant messaging so they could talk about things outside of the chat room. After many discussions about dolphins, boys, and music, Olivia suggested that she and Aida meet face to face and that Aida shouldn’t tell her parents. Aida really wanted to meet Olivia, but she thought it was weird not telling her parents.

Aida told her mother that she had met another girl in a chat room and that this girl wanted to meet her the next day at a local park. After further questioning about Aida’s new friend, her mother felt that something was not right. She felt uneasy about some of the things Olivia had told Aida. So she decided to make Aida stay home.

A week later, Aida’s mother received a call from the police asking about people in their house using chat rooms. She learned that the authorities had arrested a 42-year-old man who was visiting chat rooms posing as a young girl. His arrest came after a failed kidnapping attempt of a 15-year-old girl he had met online. The man had a criminal history of being a child predator. The police executed a search warrant of his home and Internet service provider (ISP) records that revealed the man was talking with many kids online, including a user name that was tracked to Aida’s Mom’s house. Aida’s mother realized that this man was “Olivia.” She informed the officers of Aida’s experience.

In the end, the police were very helpful in offering Aida’s parents tips on how to prevent this type of situation from happening in the future. The police gave them lots of information about the potential hazards of using chat rooms and instant messaging. The police also explained that in addition to enabling predators’ access to kids, instant messaging leaves a computer vulnerable to viruses, worms, and trojan horses.

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Crossword Hint - Aida enjoys online chat and instant messaging (IM) because it lets her discuss topics that she's interested in.

Chat rooms and IM are typically fun ways for kids to discuss topics of interest with other kids or adults. Chat rooms and IM services are often run by reliable companies who monitor activity. However, some chat rooms are not monitored, which makes it easier for youth victimizers to operate.

IM provides even more flexibility to predators because the messages are one on one. In the story you read, the man posed as another girl in the chat room. He convinced Aida to use IM so he could have private conversations with her and avoid raising other people's suspicions when he asked her to meet him.

Encourage your kids to use chat rooms that are monitored. They should never agree to a meeting with someone they've met online, without you or another trusted adult present. You can also buy software that monitors instant messaging and creates text logs of all IM discussions. And, of course, they should never give out personal information such as their name, address, or phone number.

Crossword Hint - Aida's parents were informed that chat rooms have many unseen hazards that should be guarded against.

In addition to the danger posed by youth victimizers who may try to contact or traumatize a kid in some way, some rooms discuss topics that may have a negative influence on your kids. Some rooms are hangouts of hate groups, cults, or gangs. These chat rooms can act as recruiting centres to draw in kids, leading to possible social withdrawal or even criminal activity.

It is natural for your kids to enjoy meeting new friends and joining peer groups that share their interests. Online chat rooms and instant messaging can be just another way for kids to meet others with whom they have things in common.

However, there can be undesirable groups online that you may not want your kids to associate with. You can reduce the chance that your child becomes involved with hate groups, cults, or online gangs by explaining the hazards of affiliating with these groups.

You can also use special filtering software to block messages that use key words you select, such as bomb, kill, or racial slurs. This helps prevent access to chat rooms promoting hate crime or other illegal activity—reducing the chance of your kids' becoming involved with these types of groups.

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Crossword Hint - This man was able to trick Aida by disguising his identity online.

People are usually identified in chat rooms by their user name, so it is easy to conceal true identities. This makes a chat room an ideal place for a predator to pose as a teen, or an older friend, or even a potential lover. Predators may gain kids' confidence by appearing concerned with their problems or pretending to show a genuine affection.

Both IM and chat rooms create a false sense of anonymity, but there are many "loopholes" for predators to obtain information about a child.

Talk with your kids about how people can behave in chat rooms or IM situations. If your kids understand that people in chat rooms aren't necessarily who they seem to be, they'll be less likely to be deceived by a child predator. They should leave any chat room or stop any IM that makes them feel uncomfortable and tell you or another trusted adult. And, of course, they should never give out personal information such as their name, phone number, or address.

Crossword Hint - As it turns out, this man had a criminal history of being a child predator.

Child predators actively use the Internet to victimize children. Kids are in most danger when they meet these people face to face. However, there are other ways that a child predator or youth victimizer can victimize your kids using chat rooms or IM. A child predator may:

- Send kids inappropriate messages or pictures
- Promise kids a life of adventure and excitement (sun, beach, and surf are especially alluring for kids in rural areas)
- Give unrealistic advice on problems

Even though youth victimizers may not have direct contact with your kids, they can still cause harm by sending obscene material or pushing their ideas and philosophies.

Remind your kids to be very careful about people who offer easy solutions to difficult problems or who make offers that are "too good to be true." Ask them to cut ties with anyone who pushes explicit material on them, and to tell you about it. Establish time limits with your kids for using chat rooms and IM.

You can use filtering software to restrict obscene information or graphics from being transmitted through chat or instant messaging. However, using filtering software is not always a foolproof solution.

Be sensitive to your kids' feelings if you suspect they have been influenced or upset by someone in a chat room or through IM. Contact authorities if you feel they have been victimized.

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Crossword Hint - Aida's parents learned that instant messaging is also susceptible to trojan horses and computer worms.

Instant messaging programs have loopholes or “back door” entries that leave a computer vulnerable to viruses, worms, trojan horses, and hacker attacks. All of these can cause serious technical problems to your hard drive. Unfortunately, anti-virus software is not very effective with instant messages.

Hackers have used trojan horses to steal passwords and intercept IM conversations. They can use this information to cause embarrassment or to impersonate someone. A predator who is monitoring IM conversations learns all the cues for a successful approach to a particular child.

Make sure everyone in your family knows there are no perfect defenses for computer worms and trojan horses. They should be extremely hesitant about opening attachments that are unexpected or from unknown sources. Hacking is difficult to prevent, so if you are worried about very sensitive conversations being invaded, you should use another mode of communication.

SUMMARY

There are many things you should consider when your child uses chat rooms or IM. Many families consider chat rooms and IM “off limits” until children reach a certain age.

Children can be very “tech-savvy” but not nearly as “street-wise” as they think they are. In particular, kids can forget that someone they only know online is still a stranger, even if they have chatted for weeks or months. On the Internet, it's easy to pretend. Let your kids be the techies, but talk to them about the hazards. The more they understand, the safer they are.