Dangers children face online

Dateline hidden camera investigation turns spotlight on Internet predators

By Chris Hansen
Dateline NBC

Instant messaging on the computer has become the phone for kids today. Children spend hours chatting online with their friends, and sometimes with strangers. A recent study found that one in five children online is approached by a sexual predator, a predator who may try to set up a face-to-face meeting. In a Dateline hidden camera investigation, correspondent Chris Hansen catches some of these men in the act. Also, scroll to the bottom of the page for the software mentioned in the story and more resources.

To follow the trail of an Internet predator prowling for children, from seduction in a chat room to a face-to-face meeting, Dateline rented a house, wired it with hidden cameras, and enlisted the help of an online vigilante group called "Perverted Justice." Volunteers from the group posed as teens in chat rooms, saying they were home alone and interested in sex. Within hours there were men literally lining up at our door.

The men who turned up in our investigation included a New York City firefighter and a man with a history of mental illness and a criminal record. And they all had something in common: the same excuse. Just about every man who came to our house said it was the first time he had done something like this and most claimed they really had no intention of having sex with a minor. Here's an excerpt of what we found:

Steve, 35, thinks he's got a hot date with a 14-year-old girl. Instead he'll be meeting Dateline NBC correspondent Chris Hansen. At first he seems to think I am a police officer. I haven't told him yet that I'm a television reporter and at this point he has no idea he's being videotaped.

Steve: "I knew."
Hansen: "You knew what?"
Steve: "Exactly what's going on."
Hansen: "Take your hands out of your pockets... You don't have to put them up."
Steve: "Okay, no problem, I know what's going on I'm not stupid."

It seems clear Steve thinks he's been caught in a police sting. He says he was just coming over to check it out.

Hansen: "So you were suspicious from the beginning?"
Steve: "Of course I am, I'm always suspicious."
Hansen: "Always? Do you do this a lot?"
Steve: "No this is the first time I've actually, did show up to see what was going on."
Hansen: "And you expect me to believe that."
Steve: "Yes, yes I do."

In two-and-a-half days, 18 men show up at our house after making a date on the Internet to commit statutory rape.

When 34-year-old Eddie arrives, he tries something none of the others did. Before he'll come into the kitchen he comes up with a scheme to insulate himself from possible criminal charges and he tries to get our decoy to play along.

Eddie: "Okay listen just say something for me."
Girl: "What do you want me to say?"
Eddie: "Just say Rachel you're 19 years old right?"
Girl: "I'm not though you know I'm not."
Eddie: "I don't know that."
Girl: "I told you I was 14. You saw it and you typed back to me, what are you talking about?"
Eddie: "No, no, no… Not as far as I know. As far as I know you're 19 years old right?"
Girl: "But I but…"
Eddie: "Rachel can you read between the lines?"

When Hansen walk in, Eddie admits he was trying not to incriminate himself.

**Eddie:** "My intentions are not anything so I just want to protect myself that's all."

**Hansen:** "But she told you on the Internet that she was 14."

**Eddie:** "'19' she wrote on the Internet."

**Hansen:** "Oh really?"

**Eddie:** "Yeah."

**Hansen:** "On the Internet?"

**Eddie:** "Yes."

**Hansen:** "You want to stick to that story?"

**Eddie:** "I just -- that's what I thought she wrote."

**Hansen:** "Well do you want to see the transcripts."

**Eddie:** "I'm sure you have it."

None of the men had any idea our hidden cameras were going to expose them before a national audience. When we told them, most headed for the door, like Steve, the married man with children. But some wanted a chance to try to explain themselves. When Hansen confronts Eddie, he's ready with a story. He says he's a TV producer doing research.

**Hansen:** "Where are you a television producer?"

**Eddie:** "I work independently right now."

**Hansen:** "Yeah, you know it's ironic because I work in television, too, with Dateline NBC."

At first this "television producer" seems a bit camera shy, but then decides to open up.

**Eddie:** "I haven't done anything wrong at all… if you go into the transcripts… time and time again."

**Hansen:** I've read all the transcripts. It sounds like you're looking to have a sexual experience with this girl Rachel who you were talking to on the Internet. I don't know what other conclusion you can draw."

**Eddie:** "You can search me for a condom I don't have one on me. I wouldn't have sex without one."

Eddie, who it appears has worked as a TV producer, even commends us for a job well done.
Eddie: "I'm very interested in your story I think it's a great thing you're doing. I think it's something that you should certainly do more and more of and bag people left and right."

The book mentioned in our story was SAFETY MONITOR: How to Protect Your Kids Online by Detective Mike Sullivan

The three types of software mentioned in our piece were:
Watch Right
Cyber Sentinel
Spector Pro

I-Safe, a non-profit organization that teaches children in school how to be safe online:
http://www.I-Safe.com

A government-funded CyberTipline from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, staffed 24/7 to receive reports of child exploitation online:
www.cybertipline.com OR 1-800-843-5678

Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth