



City of
Panama City Beach

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The World Wide Web can be a dark world, especially for children/teens

Chatting with a secret pal online can be fun. Trust can be built over a few conversations, even in anonymity. But there are huge dangers on the internet that parents need to be concerned about.

Today approximately 95 percent of U.S. kids between the ages of 12 and 17 are online via cell phone, computer, or tablet. One in five teenagers who regularly use the internet reports they have received an unwanted sexual solicitation.

"The statistics and the availability of internet access for our youth is frightening," said Panama City Beach Police Lt. J.R. Talamantez, who is a part of the North Florida Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force. "Kids today have their own cell phones, tablets, and laptops. Often there is a home computer. They have almost unlimited access to the internet."

Talamantez, who often speaks in the community advising kids and their parents of the risks associated with internet use, said parents must monitor their children and know what sites they are visiting. He urged parents to encourage kids not to try and mimic things they see on the internet or fall prey to any internet challenges – real or not.

"Younger children especially can be overly trusting, and students of all ages can be naïve when it comes to the dangers. Someone online can sound very friendly and supportive of any problems you may be having at home or in school when actually they are not who they make themselves out to be," Talamantez said.

Bay District Schools Superintendent Bill Husfelt said inappropriate contact with school-age children is always a concern, whether it deals with cyberbullying or predatory behavior.

"We continue to encourage parents to diligently monitor the online activity of their children. Parents need to have frequent conversations with their students about the dangers of being online and parents need to know what their students are doing online," said Husfelt.

"We do our very best to share these lessons at school, but we need parents as our partners to reinforce them at home and to continuously inspect the devices of their children to ensure the safety of all. We are pleased to do everything we can to support our parents through these challenging times and we encourage any parents who have concerns about disturbing things their children may have seen on the internet to contact a school counselor or private provider."

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Talamantez advises parents to be on the lookout for changes in their child's behavior, an unusual amount of screen time, especially at odd hours, and to be familiar with the apps that while could be harmless, could also spell trouble.

These include commonly used apps like Snapchat, Holla, Calculator%, KIK, Bumble, Whisper, and others.

The Panama City Beach Police Department offers the following tips to parents to help safeguard their children:

- Know who your children are talking to online. That person posing as a 15-year-old could be a middle-aged man.
- Know what sites your children are visiting.
- Do not allow children unlimited access to the internet.
- Stay involved in your children's lives.
- Open a dialogue with your children about the dangers of the internet.
- Be educated yourself on the internet and know how to do history searches, know popular sites for kids, and consider purchasing a parental control online monitoring device.
- If you have concerns, contact law enforcement.

"The bottom line is, we want every kid to grow up with a normal childhood and be safe from the dangers that are out there. Anything we can do to protect them, we will," Talamantez said.

For more information please contact Panama City Beach Police Lt. J.R. Talamantez at 850-233-5000 or Panama City Beach PIO Debbie Ward at 850-233-5100.