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A new threat to children

Internet opens up new avenues for predators to find victims

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Reporter

While the Internet may be one of the greatest tools of the 21st century, as with any tool – and as was recently discovered in Washington County – it can be used for evil as well as good.

On Memorial Day Weekend a 37-year-old man allegedly traveled for at least the third time this year from his home in St. James, N.Y., to Washington County to pursue a relationship with a 15-year-old girl he met online.

John A. Monetti remained in the Washington County Jail this week, held without bond pending a Wednesday, June 7, arraignment in Washington County Court. Monetti faces 10 felony charges in connection with the alleged relationship with the local girl.

The case brings very close to home the importance of keeping children safe while cruising the web.

There is no cookie-cutter profile for a child predator. Monetti was employed as a principal and an elementary school teacher before his arrest last week. He did not have a criminal record and passed background checks prior to his hiring by the William Floyd School District.

A statement from the school district also states the district “was not aware of any allegations of inappropriate behavior towards children” at the time of Monetti’s termination in October 2005.

There may not be a physical profile of a child predator, but they follow predictable patterns while selecting a target, experts said.

Child predators look for perceived weaknesses, said Stacie Rumenap, executive director of StopChildPredators.org, an organization dedicated to mandatory sentences and electronic tracking of sex offenders. They listen to children who feel they need someone to talk to about problems at home, school or with friends; kids who feel social pressure, she said. They then attempt to transition the relationship into something more.

“These people are predators and will do or say anything to gain the trust of a child,” Rumenap said. “They tend to talk to kids who feel they have nobody else to talk to.”

Being an anonymous forum, kids feel they can say things on the Internet they feel uncomfortable talking about with people they may know personally.

“It’s not normal for an adult to want to be best friends with a child,” Rumenap said.

In the past, predators used chat rooms to find their targets and then researched more information about them, said Blair school resource officer Dave Westerholt. With the new popularity of social networking programs, children are now providing a lot of information about themselves and their lives online for anyone to see. Children need to be aware that what they post on their personal sites can be read by anybody, not only their friends, Westerholt said.

Predators target children who are confused and feel they have nobody to talk to. At first they build

up trust by listening to the child's problems, but gradually they turn the conversation to one of a more sexual nature. They desensitize their target to sex by electronically sending pornography and eventually try to convince the child to meet in the real world, Westerholt said.

That is when things can get really dangerous.

"We need to empower our children so they don't have the emotional vulnerability that makes them a target," said Washington County attorney, Shurie Graeve.

Many child predators know they will go to prison if they are caught, so they are sometimes prepared to kill the child if they ever feel like they have lost control of the situation, Westerholt said.

Parents need to look out for any sort of new or unusual behavior in their children, Rumenap said.

"It is important for parents to really know what's going on in their kids' lives," she said.

Parents need to be aware of what websites their children are going to and with whom they are talking on the Internet, she said.

The best way to keep children safe on the Internet is to keep the lines of communication open, Westerholt said. Parents need to know what types of things their children look at while on the Internet. Young children should not be allowed online without some type of supervision and should not have their own Internet-capable computers in their rooms, he said.

The Blair Police Department offers an Internet safety class for fifth- through eighth-grade called i-SAFE. The program covers topics such as electronic plagiarism, viruses and email safety, as well as what to do if you encounter a child predator online.

The Washington County Sheriff's office also offers an Internet safety class for students in Arlington and Fort Calhoun.

"The big thing is telling an adult," Westerholt said.

Parents need to talk about Internet safety and the concept of strangers without instilling a fear of the Internet in their children, Rumenap said.

You do not have to respond to somebody online just because they are reaching out to you, she said.

"Most parents are responsible when it comes to teaching their kids about talking to strangers on the street," Rumenap said. "The same rules apply online."