

# Predators Are 'Current' on Their Internet Skills ... Are You?

By: Donna M. Albertone, M.P.A.

**Author's Note:** The Internet and its many services—such as Instant Messaging, Internet Relay Chat, and Weblogs—are not inherently evil, bad, or "the problem" as it relates to the online risks to children. These services can have enormous positive value when used responsibly and appropriately. These services can, however, be used by predators to access, groom, and lure children into harmful situations. It is our awareness of the potential for misuse that allows us to play a part in maintaining safe environments for children. Parents and other guardians, as well as teachers and religious educators can benefit greatly from becoming more aware of what predators know about the Internet and how they use it.

In Part 1 of this two-part series, we'll look at Instant Messaging and Internet Relay Chat.

## Instant Messaging and Internet Relay Chat

Just when you thought you were getting comfortable with logging on and "surfing" the Internet, a whole new set of terms such as Instant Messaging (IM), Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Real Simple Syndication (RSS) and Weblogs (Blogs) are thrown at you. You may have just become comfortable with the term "cyberspace," and now you are hit with the term "blogosphere." What does all this stuff mean?

Instant messaging can be fun and is a great way to "chat" with friends, relatives and colleagues. It sure beats "snail mail," and it's free—the only cost is the price you pay for your Internet access. Most IM services offer the same thing: one-on-one private chat, multi-party chat, ability to transfer files, and the ability to use a webcam or microphone for telephone-like chats.[\[1\]](#)

A *chat* is defined as having conversation by typing messages that are instantly sent to others who are logged on at the same time. Chat often occurs in *chat rooms*, which are places where many people gather (online) to discuss a variety of topics. Chat rooms are sometimes but rarely monitored and they are largely not secure.

While chatting, you can sometimes learn a lot about the person or persons with whom you are chatting. Many of these services require users to create a "profile," which is an introduction that provides information about a particular user. Name, gender, age, home address, phone number, e-mail address, and personal interests are the types of information typically included in a person's *profile*. But, users beware! People often create two or more profiles—one that is *close to the truth* and others that are fabricated. Predators create profiles that make them attractive to the type of young people they seek.

A profile that is provocative in nature will almost certainly be "hit" on by others—presumably including normal people who have a genuine interest in a particular topic as well as disingenuous people, such as child sexual abusers, who are surfing in hopes of finding a particular type of victim.

Most IM services (Yahoo Messenger, AOL, and MSN Chat, for example) are proprietary, which means they are not compatible with each other. So, someone using Yahoo Messenger, for example, cannot chat with someone using MSN Chat. However, there is a solution to this problem, and many predators are experts in applying this solution: Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which allows people all over the world to participate in real-time conversations.

It is not uncommon for the IRC to have hundreds or even thousands of channels open at the same time, with no limits to the number of people who can join a discussion.<sup>[2]</sup> Certainly there is positive communication occurring on the IRC. But visits to IRC channels (chat rooms in the IRC are called channels) can produce a great deal of sexual dialogue and wide variety of other eyebrow-raising topics.

Those who are interested in child pornography, for example, within minutes can be talking to others with the same perversion. They can share lewd photos of children from their typically vast collections of “kiddie porn.” They can share tips on avoiding arrest. They can discuss strategies for locating and seducing specific types of children. And they can chat with their peers about numerous ways to justify their perverse behavior.

To contact a child, a predator might conduct a search for “boys 13-14,” or “pre-teen girls,” or even something as specific as “blonde-haired, green eyed, 6-year-old girls in [name a state or major city].” Instantly, they have access and contact with not only other predators but also boys who think they are talking to other boys 13 or 14 years of age, or girls who are pre-teens, or ... well, you get the picture. The predator doesn’t have to go far or work very hard to make contact. And, as with Instant Messaging, conversations can become “private” with only a simple message and a couple of keystrokes. A sexual predator, posing as a child, might ask another child: “What do you say we go private for awhile?” Then, a private conversation will be opened and nobody else can interfere.<sup>[3]</sup>

Fortunately, there are other groups frequenting these channels. Police detectives and FBI agents, for example, may pose as children or teens and participate in conversations to uncover a predator. Robert Hugh Farley, a VIRTUS consultant on preventing sex crimes, is one of the world’s leading experts in this area. And, as I’m sure Bob would tell you, the sheer number of predators makes it an overwhelming task. That’s one more reason why all caring adults need to be vigilant in looking for the warning signs of possible sex abusers, and need to work together with others in their communities to help create and maintain safe environments for children.

Remember the hallmark of VIRTUS training! The “live” Protecting God’s Children awareness sessions teach us that we are essentially powerless to curb a predator’s appetite for children—especially if there is nothing prohibiting them from acting out on that desire. Our only way of preventing abuse is by taking away the predator’s opportunity to offend.<sup>[4]</sup>

Be available and present when children use Instant Messaging or enter chat rooms. Use the parental controls that are available to you through your Internet provider. Learn the lingo that people use in chat rooms and ask your child about anything you don’t understand. Your children may not answer you or may, under pressure, give you a false answer out of fear of losing their computer privileges. But never underestimate the power of letting your children know that you are not as “out-of-it” as they think.

Remind youth that they cannot believe everything they read on the Internet and it is wise to be highly skeptical of anything you read in a chat room. People *make things up* to appear to be something other than what they are.

Advise children and adolescents to never reveal personal information such as their real name, address, phone number, or email address. And they should **NEVER**, under any circumstances make plans to physically meet with anyone they have met on the Internet—at least not without a parent.

Remember, the Internet provides openness and secrecy at the same time. Try to keep up with new advances in computer and Internet technology. Usually, a simple Internet search for a particular topic will provide enough information to greatly increase your awareness.

You don't need to become an expert on the Internet and its affiliated services. You simply need to know enough to put the proper safeguards in place, to ask the right questions, and to monitor your child's online activities in search of any warning signs of a predator.

[1] Spanbauer, S., Lasky, M., O'Reilly, D., Dalh, E. (2004). A grown-ups guide to instant messaging. *PCWorld*, 22 (3), 168-172.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Anthony, K. (2004). The art of blogging. *Counseling & Psychotherapy Journal*, 15 (9), 38-40.

[4] Finkelhor, D. (1994). Current information on the scope and nature of child sexual abuse: 4 the future of children. *Sexual Abuse of Children*, 2, 31-53.

#### About the Author:

Donna M. Albertone, M.P.A., is an independent consultant and is VIRTUS Coordinator for the Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio. She is a strong advocate of safe environment programs for churches, religious organizations, schools, and extracurricular programs, and she's passionate about the safety of children and delivering services to those who are most vulnerable. Donna is a doctoral candidate at Johns Hopkins University, where she's pursuing a degree in Health and Human Services with concentration on Management of Non-profit Organizations. Her dissertation title is: Exposure to Pornography: The Effects on Children. Donna holds a master of public administration degree in health and human services, a certificate in healthcare management, and a bachelor's degree in business and criminal justice. She has 22 years of experience in the design and delivery of social service programs and previously served as executive director, community services, for the state of Ohio Department of Mental Health. Donna's experience also includes service as executive director, Heartfelt Solutions (a non-profit social service), vice president, SunStone Behavioral Healthcare. And, she also has experience as an adolescent and child therapist specializing in depression and suicide issues.