

From the Sheriff:

The past couple of weeks have brought a heightened awareness to the community regarding the internet and our children. Two very close calls occurred recently in SE Wisconsin. The first, a teenage boy was encouraged to travel on his own to Arizona. This young man was solicited by an adult who was also wanted in another state for sex crimes. The older man preyed upon this teenager and convinced, by email and chat rooms, to travel on his own to another state to they could meet. That total strangers have the ability to convince teenagers to do this is scary! This case made very clear the point that parents need to be aware of their children's internet habits.

Behavior that should cause concern for parents include late night emailing and the minimizing of the computer screen when a parent enters the room. Parents can also track the content of their children's internet surfing by viewing cookies left on a computer whenever a web-site has been viewed. If you are not familiar with technology or have no computer savvy, inquire with a friend that does. Your computer can be set to deny access to certain sites or block/filter the viewing of sites that offer inappropriate material. Sexual predators enter chat rooms for the sole purpose of engaging in these electronic conversations with children.

The second case earlier this week involved a teenage girl who was located in another state after she met a man over the internet. This girl left her home to be with this adult male in another state. This case highlighted the fact that the parent was not very active in the monitoring of their daughter's life. As parents, we would hope that this would never be the case for us but we must pay attention to what our children are doing socially and over the net.

Dodge County is not immune to this type of crime or conduct. Approx. two years ago we investigated a case in which a 14 yr. girl had met an older man on the internet. The email became sexual in nature. The man knew the age of the girl and still traveled from SE Wisconsin to her rural home for the purpose of having sex with her. This case resulted in the arrest of the individual for sexual assault. These cases are labor intensive requiring computer forensic experts to examine computers. These cases are also difficult to prove and even more difficult to prosecute. These deterrents will not deter the Sheriff's Department from thorough investigations.

As parents, we also must ask ourselves if a stranger can convince our children into leaving their families to be united with a stranger - a sexual predator, what else can they be talked into? If your child is spending an abnormal amount of late night hours on the internet inquire as to what he/she is doing? Please sit down and talk with your children. Apply the same rules to the computer as you would your teenage driver and the family sedan - abuse it and lose it! If you are as naive as I am in regards to computers and the internet, take a short course and become familiar with it. It may be the best investment you can make. Thanks for listening tnehls@co.dodge.wi.us.