



CHAT ROOMS (and Online Gaming)

A chat room is a virtual room where people can communicate in real time while on the Internet. Users type their messages with a keyboard and the entered text appears on the monitor, along with the text of the other chat room visitors.

Conversations within the chat room are not private. While each chat room is different, some of these virtual spaces allow for dozens of users to view what is being said simultaneously. Many times a group of individuals hold a conversation among themselves and ignore the other conversations within the room. (Almost like when you're at a wedding reception; there are lots of people in the same room, all holding conversations at the same time.)

Because there are so many people in the chat room, it's easy to lose track of who is there and it is impossible to tell who is watching what is being said in any one conversation. (Again, in the wedding reception scenario, if a number of people are engaged in a conversation, they might be unaware of someone eavesdropping.)

WHAT ARE CHAT ROOM DANGERS?

1. Research shows that predators often begin the grooming process in chat rooms where they watch conversations and glean information about individuals that "appear" interesting. Once the predator has identified a target, he will search for information about that individual until he feels he has enough to engage in a conversation.
2. When users sign up to use a chat room, they are asked to fill out a profile. While most times only a name and E-mail address is required, new users (especially adolescents) will complete the entire profile. This includes name, age, phone number, address, hobbies, information about school and even pictures. When a predator identifies a target, the first thing he does is conduct a search of the user profile. If it is complete, much of his work has been done for him.
3. People who go online aren't always truthful about their age, identity and motives. Children tend to place trust in others and believe what they are told, even by strangers.

HOW DOES A PARENT PROTECT A CHILD WHO USES CHAT ROOMS?

1. Talk with your children about which sites are used for "chat". Make sure they know that even though they are holding a conversation with their school friends, chat rooms provide the medium where others can also see what is being said. Tell your children that predators lurk in chat rooms hoping to learn personal information about the individuals who chat there, and that they must be careful about what they are saying about themselves when they engage in online conversations.
2. Place your computer in an area of your home where you can easily monitor your child's Internet activity. Be present in the room so you can occasionally view the monitor. Regularly ask your children about their online friends and activities and ask them to show you what they are doing.
3. When filling out profiles, teach your children not to provide any more information than is required.
4. Set time limits, rules and at what times of day your children may use the Internet. Excessive time online, especially at night, may indicate a problem.
5. Watch for clues that indicate your children might be engaged in potentially dangerous activities. These might include:
 - suddenly changing the screen when you walk into the room
 - secretive behaviors
 - phone calls at strange times of the day
 - hiding storage devices
 - spending more time than usual online, especially at night
 - unknown charges on your credit card

T.E.S.T.