

Boys' Life[®]

Stay Right Online

By Judith Broadhurst

Computers and modems connect to worlds of fun. But look out—you never know who's at the other end of the line.

Criminal Investigator Frank Clark lurks around shadowy places at night, disguised and looking for criminals. But he doesn't do it on foot or in a car. He does it by computer.

Part of Clark's job for the Pierce County prosecutor's office in Tacoma, Wash., is protecting kids who use computers. With a computer and a modem, kids can go "online" and communicate with other computer users around the world. They can exchange messages, games, even files containing photographs and voices.

It's fun. But the danger is you never can be sure whom you're talking to online. And that can lead to trouble.

"The problems are very serious," Clark says. "You have no idea if the person is playing a role or playing a game, if they're real or they're dangerous, because they can use false names and say anything they want."

Open Doors to All Kinds of Talk

Most of the problems occur on the three major online services: America Online, CompuServe and Prodigy. They offer "chat rooms" in which strangers can "talk," along with easy-to-use electronic mail. They also offer parental controls, which your parents can use to shut the doors to these rooms.

Too often, those controls are needed. Some adults hang out at online chat rooms, posing as kids and trying to learn about kids' interests. They claim to share those interests, hoping kids will exchange e-mail or even talk by phone. Often, they try to get kids to talk about not-so-nice topics.

The scariest thing is when they arrange to meet kids in person. In the worst cases, children have been murdered. That happened to a 10-year-old boy in Maryland in 1993.

When Good Kids Go Bad

Another trouble kids can get into online is less scary, but it can lead to serious problems too.

Call it "good kids meet bad kids." When this happens, the "bad" kids too often take control.

Doug Rehman, a special agent for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, says this has led to cases in which the kids got stolen credit-card numbers and ordered merchandise online.

"A kid might think, 'I'll try it once to see what happens,'" Rehman says.

What happens is, eventually the kid gets arrested for theft.

You've Got a Choice: To Have Fun

Anytime you get several million people together, as online services do, some of them are bound to be weird. But that shouldn't spoil your fun—as long as you stay right online.

"I haven't had any problems, nor have any of my friends," says Matt Ellis, a 13-year-old in Scottsdale, Ariz. "If I ever did, I would just log off. If there's something you don't want to see, you don't have to see it."

The experts and kids we interviewed all agree that the benefits of being online far outweigh the risks.

"It's not that you should be scared, but you should be aware," says John Lucich, an investigator for the New Jersey attorney general's office. "Computers are tools, and like any other tool, they must be used with caution."

10 Tips for Online Safety

When you're online, you're in a public place, among thousands of people who are online at the same time. Follow these guidelines, and you'll be fine and have fun:

- 1 Keep conversations with strangers to public places online, not in e-mail.
- 2 Don't give anyone online your real last name, phone numbers at home or school, your parents' workplaces, the name or location of your school or your home address unless you have your parents' permission first. Never give your password to anyone but your parents.
- 3 If someone sends you e-mail saying things that make you feel uncomfortable, trust your instincts. You're probably right to be wary. Don't respond. If they send you a chat message, log off, or leave that area immediately, and tell your parents what happened.
- 4 If somebody tells you to keep what's going on between the two of you secret, tell your parents.
- 5 Be careful whom you talk to. Anyone who starts talking about subjects that make you feel uncomfortable is probably an adult posing as a kid.
- 6 Pay attention if someone tells you things that don't fit together. One time an online friend may say he's 12, and another time he'll say he's 14. That's a warning that he's lying and may be an adult posing as a kid.
- 7 Never talk to anybody by phone if you know them only online, unless you talk to your parents about it first. If someone tells you to call them—even if it's collect or with a toll-free 800 number—that's a warning. They can get your phone number that way, either from their phone bill record or a new service called "Caller ID."
- 8 Never agree to meet someone you've met online any place off line, in the real world, unless you have your parents' permission. If you do get together with someone you've known only online, take a parent with you and be sure to meet in a well-lit, public place.
- 9 Investigator Frank Clark says to watch out if someone online starts talking about: hacking (breaking into other people's computer systems), phreaking (illegal use of long-distance services or cellular phones) or viruses (releasing a program online that destroys or damages data when other people download it onto their computers).
- 10 Promise your parents and yourself that you will honor any rules your parents make about how much time you're allowed to spend online and what you do and where you go when you're there.

The Boy Scouts of America
<http://www.scouting.org>