

# SUNDAY

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DOTHAN EAGLE

Showers and thunderstorms likely. Weather 2A

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Photo illustration by Erin Hitt / ehitt@dothaneagle.com

Visitors of the Ozark-Dale County Public Library speak with the *Dothan Eagle* about their experiences with online predators.

## CYBER SAFETY

### Parents, law enforcement urge caution with Internet

**Ebony Horton**  
ehorton@dothaneagle.com

More and more children of parents who refuse to monitor their child's online chatting and social networking are falling victim to child predators and sex abuse, according to authorities.

Finding the culprit becomes even more difficult, as authorities have to prove exactly who the violator was, and whether the charges are to be tried in a federal or state court.

"Children have no right to privacy at any time of day and the parents should be in their business. Kids have been violated because of chats online. It's a dangerous game to play," Dale County District Attorney Kirke Adams said as he recalled past cases involving cyber predators.

"Our biggest challenge is educating young people and their parents about the dangers. It would certainly lessen the load for my office and save a lot of time trying to repair the damage that is done by computer crimes."

"Cyber predator" is often used to describe an adult who intentionally seeks to take advantage of vulnerable children and teens online. One in seven children are solicited online for sex, according to the National Center for Missing

#### What is a cyber predator?

Any one of any age who actively seeks to take physical, sexual and/or emotional advantage of a person, particularly a child, online.

and Exploited Children.

Authorities said the strategy by some cyber predators can be twofold.

According to Dale County Sheriff's Investigator Tim Byrd, one common instance is when suspects from out of town entertain young children online long enough for the child to feel comfortable enough with a physical visit.

With the help of parents and trained investigators, local law enforcement often intercept the encounters with a specialized state task force for Internet Crimes Against Children.

A sting two years ago netted two such arrests. A 47-year-old Birmingham man was charged in the county with child molestation after authorities

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# Safety

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made online arrangements for him to travel to Ozark and meet a child he believed was under 16.

A 44-year-old Millbrook man was charged the same year for the same crime with ICAC's help, Byrd said.

"We just had a case where an illegal alien from Canada pleaded guilty in federal court to several crimes, one of which included him trying to come here to meet a young person. We had most all we needed to make the case, because a lot of times, these people think they are so smart to where they're dumb," Byrd said.

According to Adams, a more common occurrence in Dale County than out-of-town cyber predators are the local children who enter a chat room and pretend to be older than they really are, or when an adult poses as younger and arranges a meeting.

Authorities believe the former could have been the case for 21-year-old Demetrius Borders, who was charged recently with second-degree rape after authorities said he had consensual sex with a 12-year-old girl after meeting her online.

His case is expected to go before a Dale County grand jury in September.

"A lot of times it's the parent that reports the cases, but it's also the parents who are either not monitoring their kids or signing their kids up for Facebook and MySpace and these other networking sites. You can't spend enough time with your kids. They should never be on these sites alone,"

## 10 ways to keep kids safe online

- Place the computer in the most public room in your home.
- Establish ground rules for Internet usage.
- Share time online by surfing on the Internet with your child.
- Instruct your child not to give out personal information without your permission.
- Read the privacy policy of any site that asks for personal information before you allow your child to respond.
- If your child wants to meet in person someone they've met online, make sure a parent is present.
- Instruct your child never to respond to email or chat messages that make them feel uncomfortable. And ensure that your child reports such messages to you when/if they occur.
- Inform your Internet service provider of any inappropriate uses of the Internet encountered by you or your child. Report child pornography immediately to your local state police or federal law enforcement authorities. You may also report it to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
- Encourage your child to share their online experiences with you.
- Know exactly what various parental control tools can and can't do and how they work.

Source: Alabama Department of Public Safety, Task Force for Internet Crimes Against Children

Adams said.

"You think your kids are smart enough to handle things themselves, but they're not. Sometimes they just don't know the risks they are facing, especially when they chat with some of the people they do or post some of the things they do about their family's whereabouts."

Adams said program filters could help secure what sites a child can and can't visit if a parent is not nearby.

Ozark Police Chief Tony Spivey said one of the best ways to avoid a cyber predator is by refusing to send personal information like pictures and locations over the Web.

The department often hosts seminars where investigators are able to educate parents and teens

on how to properly use social networking.

"The bottom line is that anyone using the Internet needs to be alert for any suspicious activity. If you feel uncomfortable in any way, then cease the conversation, leave the site and report the activity to a responsible party. A lot of times the conversation begins with innocent chatting," Spivey said.

While parent Ruth Clark said it is seldom she uses a computer herself, she said it is crucial to monitor her grandchildren's use.

"Sometimes a child could say they're doing school work and it be something else. You have to be the responsible one to look over them and pull them away when you have to," she said.