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[Online danger zone](#)
[Chat-room predators are only one
menace: Cyberspace presents an
array of risks that may be hazardous
to your child's well-being](#)

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The Internet once was seen as a golden "information superhighway" transporting the next generation to the Promised Land. Now it may feel more like a minefield -- seductive on the surface, but seeded with subterranean hazards.

Few families have escaped the warning sirens about sexual predators stalking children via the computer. It's hard to miss those Bay Area billboards claiming that 1 in 5 children has been sexually solicited online, although only a tiny fraction of those involve aggressive solicitations from someone believed to be over age 25. What experts fear is that parents remain relatively unaware of the much more ordinary hazards for their children in cyberspace:

Online bullying, with kids taking harassment from the playground to an exponentially wider audience.

Profiteers who run online pharmacy and gambling sites -- and couldn't care less about the ages of their customers.

Computer addiction, as players of elaborate online games such as World of Warcraft and City of Heroes become hopelessly obsessed.

Web sites in which teens reinforce self-destructive behavior -- for example, "Friends of Ana" sites advocating anorexia.

Blog blowback from hip cyber social registers such as the wildly popular MySpace.com, in which kids become confessors and poseurs -- at their peril.

American parents always have fretted over the newest recreation fad. A quarter century ago, they worried that Pac-Man and Donkey Kong fostered attention deficit disorder. A century ago, they panicked that a new pool table would trigger truancy, tobacco use and trouble in River City.

Defenders of cyberspace -- including its frequent young inhabitants -- say it encourages creativity and personal expression, and helps kids with similar interests connect across the

globe, in a forum where race, accent and other physical attributes are irrelevant.

Fair enough. But adults and kids alike should be aware of potential pitfalls.

Boundless bully pulpit

San Francisco's Washington High is still recovering from an incident in November in which a cyberbully hacked into the school's Web site to humiliate a single student. For several hours, while administrators scrambled to block it, the school site featured an obscene photo montage of the student's face superimposed on other bodies -- labeled with his name, a racial slur and gang slogans.

"It was awful -- enough to make you feel physically ill just looking at it," said Principal Andrew Ishibashi. "And of course word of it spread all around the school."

Investigators have yet to pinpoint the perpetrator.

"When I do school presentations, this always comes up as the No. 1 problem," said attorney Parry Aftab, executive director of the nonprofit WiredSafety.org. "Lots of kids think it's worse to be bullied online than in person. If you know somebody intends to sock you in the face in the schoolyard, you might be able to avoid them, take a different hallway, follow a different route home. But cyberbullying follows you wherever you go -- to your new school, to your grandmother's house."

Whereas brawn is a prerequisite for schoolyard bullies, cyberbullies can come in all shapes and sizes.

Adolescents -- particularly girls -- have long exploited the rumor mill to humiliate a social outcast or a rival for a boy's attention. The Web ups the ante.

There are the online polls inviting participants to post salacious or critical assessments of their classmates -- as in "Who's the sluttiest girl at school?" or "Reasons to Hate Alex." There are the double agents who entice teens into e-mail chats about their crushes, fears, embarrassments -- and then post them for public ridicule. There are the sneaks who use camera phones to take other students' pictures naked in the locker room and then display them online.

The parents of Vermont 13-year-old Ryan Halligan had warned him not to talk to strangers online. In retrospect, his own classmates posed a graver threat. Silently he endured months of their online torture -- pronouncements like "You're a loser!" Eventually, he began threatening to take his own life.

"Tonight's the night," he typed.

"It's about time," came the response.

Ryan had the last word: he hanged himself.

One victim who became a crusader is Samantha Hahn, the National American Miss for 2005.

Her saga began in sixth grade, when her best friend started a rumor that Samantha was lesbian. Soon a circle of girls who dubbed themselves "the Evil Angels" were working around the clock to make Samatha's life hell.

The label followed her to three schools.

"Even now there are nights I relive the negative experiences in my dreams," she shared online. "They can hide behind a screen name, remaining anonymous while the victim becomes increasingly vulnerable and defenseless I received instant messages and e-mails saying, 'We're going to kill you'; 'I wouldn't go to the bathroom alone if I were you'; and 'you better watch your back.' "

A survey by the nonprofit i-SAFE America found that while almost half of kids had been bullied online, 58 percent never told an adult about it.

Wages of exploitation

When 17-year-old Ryan Haight of La Mesa (San Diego County) used the computer in his family's den to order painkillers online, court reports indicate that 100 tablets of hydrocodone (a generic version of Vicodin) arrived in the mail a few days later, c.o.d. -- despite the fact that he had no valid prescription.

And when his mother discovered him lifeless in his own bed from an overdose of a variety of drugs, including morphine, which he purchased online, it was another chilling reminder that not all online predators are seeking sex.

Instead these predators are in the pursuit of profit, and they often strike a bonanza among younger computer users who know how to access their parents' credit card or PayPal accounts, but not how to spot a scam.

The Haight case helped prompt several Internet search engines to ban advertising from unlicensed pharmacies. Nonetheless, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration continues to dismantle rogue pharmacies, including one operation that agents say was illegally distributing more than 3.5 million doses of heavily controlled substances per month.

A bill sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., would demand disclosure of the pharmacists connected to such sites and prohibit them from referring customers to doctors who write prescriptions based on online questionnaires without ever seeing their patients.

Age also poses little barrier to teens who -- although they would be shown the door in Vegas -- can slip into an online casino.

The proliferation of virtually unregulated cyber gambling has led to an increase in the number of problem gamblers between the ages of 11 and 19 seeking counseling. About a quarter of them start playing online games of chance for free, got hooked, then graduate up to actual wagering. Teen gamblers -- lacking impulse control -- are three times more likely to become addicted than adults, according to a Harvard Medical School study.

Screen addicts

Trask Dunlap says he's quite confident he's not addicted to computer games.

Yes, the Petaluma 18-year-old averages six hours per day playing the intricate online fantasy game World of Warcraft. Yes, for him a social gathering may involve some friends who are fellow gamers hauling their computers to his house for an all-night marathon. Yes, he recently logged 37 consecutive hours of play -- stopping only for bathroom breaks, gulps of a Rockstar energy drink and a quick run to Jack in the Box.

But, he insisted, "I know myself, and I know I could quit anytime."

His parents, psychotherapists Peter and Margaret Dunlap, aren't so sure. They see their son as an otherwise great kid who is developing an unhealthy screen obsession.

"To me it is addiction -- a human cul-de-sac that doesn't lead to freedom and joy or meaning," said his father, who worries that Trask has trouble "finding the outdoors."

The family lives in the country and hasn't had TV reception for years. His parents now regret allowing Trask to start playing GameBoy at age 5. He counters that their restrictive strategy backfired and merely enhanced the computer's appeal -- likening it to a little kid who is forbidden to pour his own pancake syrup and thus never learns for himself how much is too much. A few months ago, chafing at their restrictions on his computer time, he tested out of high school and moved in with a fellow computer gamer.

There is debate in the social sciences about whether people actually suffer computer "addiction" -- a word that constitutes a strict diagnosis in the psychiatric world -- although therapists report a growing clientele with symptoms of obsessive-compulsive behavior linked to the computer. Maressa Orzack, a clinical psychologist who runs the Computer Addiction Study Center at Harvard's McLean Hospital, now estimates more than 1 in 10 gamers develop addiction -- and says the most susceptible tend to be "really bright kids ... who are feeling overwhelmed by other factors in their lives."

On her list of symptoms indicating unhealthy dependence on the computer: feeling irritable or depressed when away from it; spending increased time and money on computer activities; and neglecting work, school or family obligations.

Among those who have researched online games, Nick Yee provides a positive assessment. While pursuing a doctorate in the communications department at Stanford University, he also runs his own Web site where he has collected years of his own studies and essays about computers -- indicating, for example, that many gamers report gaining real-life skills -- leadership, crisis management, logistical planning -- from role-playing when, for example, they've commandeered a medieval army to slay cyberdragons.

"It's a great equalizer because it's totally merit-based," he said. "Where in the world outside of games can a 15-year-old lead a team of adults?"

Or, as Trask would say, users find computer games "definitely not mind-numbing -- quite the opposite." Recently, economic circumstances led him to move back home and he's taking classes at Santa Rosa Junior College, although his World of Warcraft devotion still leads to household battles.

"My concern," said his mother, "is that the computer is taking him away from his life."

Mutual self-destruction

"Don't enter here unless you want to be a cut above!" declares one Web site offering hundreds of posts from mostly young members trying to be just that. Participants are into self-injury and mutilation -- some trying to stop, but many others encouraging the practice.

"Yes, yes, feel the agony to the max -- let the pain take you so low that you've never been so high," writes one girl who identifies herself as 16 and describes the exquisite psychic rewards she gets from the feel of a blade on her skin.

The beauty and danger of online communities is that teenagers can use searches and tags to connect with peers who share their interests -- be it Bible study or environmental activism or self-destructive neuroses. Hundreds of cyberforums orbit around anorexia, bulimia, drug addiction and the like, created by and for kids with similar preoccupations.

Some of these espouse the philosophy that kids can overcome such disorders in part by revealing their private struggles with those who are similarly struggling. But such sites are outnumbered by others in which participants call their choices "lifestyle options," not mental disorders -- and display hostility toward parents, doctors and counselors trying to help them recover.

A typical pro-Ana site embracing anorexia, for example, displays photos of bony celebrities and hundreds of "thinspiration" quotations:

"All the food you eat will rot in your stomach, let it rot on the plate instead."

"Quod mi nutruit, mi destruit" -- Latin for what nourishes me, destroys me.

"A flat stomach won't suffice -- only a Concave one means Perfection."

"I want to walk in the snow and leave no footprints."

Stanford researchers are pioneering ways to assess such sites, with early results indicating that visitors don't necessarily have a sicker profile than other anorexics, even though they do glean new techniques to perpetuate eating disorders.

"It is helpful for many of these teens to know they're not alone However, these sites also give them a disordered, skewed slant on what normative behavior is like," said Rebecka Peebles, instructor in adolescent medicine at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital. She is the co-author of the first study of the phenomenon, with medical student Jenny Wilson. "My sense is these Web sites are not a vector for contagion ... but I worry that they can, in vulnerable

people, reinforce very unhealthy ideas."

Invading myspace

Teens and even pre-teens know Web sites like MySpace, Xanga, Bebo and Facebook as network neighborhoods to intersect with peers and design their own profile pages -- indeed, their own "images" -- from the ground up. But browse these sites and it becomes clear that many of the participants are operating on the fallacious assumption that only their like-minded friends will ever see their sites.

Such was the case with the 12-year-old daughter of Stefan Wever of San Francisco.

On a whim last November, Wever decided to view the page his daughter had crafted for herself on MySpace. What popped up horrified him: a photo of her dressed up in a provocative pose, alongside explicit lyrics, and the declaration that she was 18 years old. The piece de resistance was her URL: "La Loca Prostituta."

Confronted by her parents, the girl tearfully contended that everyone in her class made similar postings, and that she lied about her age to be allowed access to MySpace (users must enter a birth date indicating they are at least 14, although this is not verified).

Wever surmised that his daughter wasn't serious -- but he knew just how easily her post could be misinterpreted. "I logged onto her MySpace, replaced her photo with a very scary looking picture of me, changed the caption to GROUNDED and wrote in her profile that I was her father and was very disappointed in my daughter, that she had betrayed the trust we had in her, and was placing herself in potentially grave danger."

The parents also restricted their daughter's computer access -- homework only -- for half a year, forbidding her from using a computer at any friend's house.

And their relationship since is better, Wever insisted. "She knew we generally trusted her judgment, but this one time she had really let us down."

MySpace may appear to be a free, cozy network run by an amiable guy named Tom, but actually it's fast approaching 50 million members and is owned by right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who paid a cool \$580 million to add it to his portfolio of conservative tabloids and Fox News. He was clever enough to retain co-founders Tom Anderson and Chris De Wolfe to give the patina of edginess.

Users don't just lie about their ages -- many desperately try to look and sound older as well, which in their immature worldview often means liberally using the f-word, striking lots of "come hither" lingerie poses and boasting about precisely how wasted they got over the weekend. Clearly a large proportion of posts are partially fake -- there can't be that many teenagers aspiring to become serial killers or strippers.

"I think adults would overreact if they started randomly browsing profiles because ... it's just kids messing around," said Xanga aficionado Justin Skyles, a San Jose ninth-grader. "I think

kids could probably spot what's true and what's not, but parents don't really have any business in that zone because they might just freak out over nothing."

Concerned adults say such sites feed into a culture that prizes vulgarity over meaningful communication and treats girls, in particular, as sex objects. The environment encourages kids to be far more suggestive online than they would feel comfortable being in real life. And of course such sites offer a virtual shopping mall of victims to predators, who can browse for someone just in their taste, age range and neighborhood, and glean tips on how to lure them in. ("You a fan of Kurt Cobain? Nirvana so rocked!")

Few young users of such sites realize that parents increasingly peruse these pages, private school administrators who have expelled students for postings, and police officers have picked up information to bust keggers and drug deals.

And personal pages -- even old, deleted postings that nonetheless are archived and therefore accessible -- could become part of a background check when teenagers apply for colleges, scholarships and jobs. Some firms hired to run background checks on applicants already are data-mining such sites.

The 21st century seems locked in a struggle to balance freedom and privacy against safety and security. Nationally, that debate revolves around terrorism. At home, it's all about the computer.

Families are straining to negotiate their own compromises. How much parental supervision is required? How much time online is too much? Should kids surrender their passwords?

Parents at least need to keep in mind a checklist of danger signs, including kids who spend increasing amounts of time online, who seem furtive about their online pursuits or whose attitude changes radically. Internet filtering software helps, but it isn't foolproof -- and can be thwarted by computer-savvy users.

More and more parents are checking in on sites like MySpace, which provide a window into the world of their sons and daughters.

Still others -- call them diligent or suspicious -- are resorting to sophisticated software that can reconstruct every keystroke. Programs such as PC Tattletale, which can be download for a free trial, captures screen shots every four seconds.

Cyberspace can be an eye-opening, fun and even magical place to explore. But young voyagers -- and wise parents of those sojourners -- must be keenly aware of the terrain, and even more careful of where they step.

SEXUAL PREDATORS --

Pedophiles are trolling cyberspace, but is the media focus on this real but rare danger distracting families from more prevalent online risks?

INTERNET BULLIES -- The "grapevine" has gone global -- giving kids a handy way to smear, threaten and terrorize with anonymity. And most victims don't tell.

ONLINE PROFITEERS -- Web pharmacies and casinos can unabashedly exploit teens, who may lose their college savings to online poker..or order narcotics c.o.d.

SCREEN ADDICTION -- As fantasy games zap the life out of some teens, families resort to bribing them to take a walk -- or a shower.

MUTUAL SELF DESTRUCTION -- Online teens swap strategies for damaging behaviors -- such as one site advising bulimics to avoid detection by "purging" in the shower.

MYSPEACE INVADERS -- Kids posture on personal pages -- without realizing that parents, teachers, bosses and colleges may be taking a look.

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