

Online Sexual Exploitation: Who Is At Risk? — Tip Sheet

MAJOR RISK MARKERS

- Activities
- Characteristics

WHO IS NOT AT RISK?

- Activities
- Characteristics

Recent research has shown that not all youth are equally at risk online, nor are all online activities equally risky. Rather, there are certain characteristics and online activities that could be considered risk markers – indications that someone is likely to take risks online and fall victim to online sexual solicitation. Many of these markers are the same as those used in the identification of at-risk youth; in general, the same youth are at risk online as offline. Most of these markers are not by themselves an indication that a youth is at risk: rather, it is a pattern of characteristics or activities – beginning at three of the known risk markers – that suggests a youth is vulnerable to online sexual solicitations.

MAJOR RISK MARKERS INCLUDE:

Activities

- Using chat rooms
- Talking about sex online
- Sending personal information or pictures to people known only online
- Seeking pornography online
- Using the Internet to harass or embarrass others

Characteristics

- Ages 13-17
- Female
- Gay or questioning sexuality if male
- Significant conflict with parents
- Offline physical or sexual abuse

WHO IS NOT AT RISK?

The vast majority of youth online face little risk of falling victim to online sexual solicitation, and most online activities carry no risk. In particular, the following are not associated with online sexual solicitation:

Activities

- Using social networking sites
- Using email or instant messaging
- Participating in online gaming or virtual worlds

Characteristics

- Age under 12

“The young people who are at the greatest risk online, in all areas of risk, are those who are at greater risk in the real world... The majority of young people are generally making safe and responsible choices online, effectively responding to the negative incidents that do occur, and are not distressed by these incidents.”

Willard, Nancy. Research that is ‘Outdated and Inadequate’? An Analysis of the Pennsylvania Child Predator Unit Arrests in Response to Attorney General Criticism of the Berkman Report. Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, 2009.