

BEFORE
THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

“MAKING THE INTERNET SAFE FOR KIDS: THE ROLE OF ISP’S AND SOCIAL
NETWORKING SITES”

JUNE 28, 2006
WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
DETECTIVE FRANK DANNAHEY
ROCKY HILL, CONNECTICUT POLICE DEPARTMENT

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman Whitfield, Ranking Member Stupak, and members of the Committee, I am Detective Frank Dannahey of the Rocky Hill, Connecticut Police Department. I have been a member of law enforcement for the past 25 years; for the last 15 years, I have been assigned to the Youth Division of the Rocky Hill Connecticut Police Department. Over the last seven years, I have been involved in investigations and education concerning Internet Crimes Against Children. I have served in an online undercover capacity to detect Internet predators. My current efforts involve Internet safety programs directed toward parents, students, school officials, and law enforcement. In the past seven years, I have seen technology change in a direction that both benefits and assists online predators in carrying out their criminal activity. With the majority of America’s teens online, the pool of potential online victims is vast.

In February 2006, an incident occurred in Middletown, Connecticut that attracted national attention. Seven teen females from the ages of twelve to 16 years were victims of sexual assault by older males they met on MySpace.com. All of these crimes occurred within a very short period of time. I was asked by the Middletown Police Department to assist them with parent education programs on Internet safety. As these programs for Middletown were being developed, we were contacted by Dateline NBC. Dateline was interested in profiling these crimes as well as reporting on the educational programs for parents. While preparing for the educational programs, I became involved in an online test of teen vulnerability. In a departure from the normal type of online undercover scenario, I took on the role of a teen male named “Matt.” “Matt” was a 19 year old “new kid in town” who was looking for online friends from Middletown, Connecticut. In just two weeks, “Matt” had over 100 online “friends” on MySpace.com. I was particularly surprised and shocked to see that a majority of young teens, who were 14 and 15 years old, allowed “Matt” on to their “private page.” The information on a “private page” is not viewable by anyone unless that person allows someone on as a “friend.” Some teens questioned “Matt” about who he was before allowing him on their MySpace page as a “friend.” Many teens allowed him on as a “friend” with no questions asked.

Once “Matt” was allowed on the teenagers’ MySpace pages, it became immediately obvious that personal information was readily available and easily volunteered. I was able to find out information such as where a teen lived, worked, their

full name and date of birth, where they went to school, as well as home and cellular phone numbers. Photos posted on teens' sites were usually photos of themselves that could assist in locating them. Some of the photos posted are highly inappropriate if not provocative. It was not uncommon to see photos of teens involved in underage drinking, drug use, and risky behavior. As "Matt" became friends with teens online, he had access to messages known as "bulletins." These "bulletins" can only be viewed if you have "friend" status. Through these "bulletins," I was able to gain much personal information about my online friends. Teenagers readily discuss their social activities and provide phone numbers to contact them.

In one case, I saw a real time message from a teen telling the exact location that she and her friends were about to walk to. If I had a devious intent, I could easily stalk or intercept her and her friends. Many of the teens use the "bulletins" to post surveys that reveal very personal information about them. Surveys that can be viewed by the general public are also a common sight on a teen's web page. In one case, I found a 377 question survey on the site of one of my online "friends," who was a 15 year old female. This survey included the teen's personal information as well as her likes and dislikes. These surveys assist predators in establishing a dialogue with a teen as they attempt to infiltrate that teen's online world.

One of the most concerning incidents of the "Matt" online experiment occurred when one of my online "friends" suggested that we meet in person. The in-person meet is the most dangerous scenario online. Teenagers meeting an online stranger sometimes become the victim of a sexual assault, or worse. The 16 year old female that made the suggestion to meet in person communicated with "Matt" on a daily basis. This teen later said that she allowed "Matt" to be one of her online "friends" because she saw that other teens she knew were also "friends" of "Matt." I found that teens are very trusting of people they meet online and are very willing to share their personal thoughts and information with virtual strangers.

As the "Matt" experiment was drawing to a close, three mothers of "Matt's" online "friends" agreed to share their child's online interactions with "Matt" with the Dateline NBC viewing audience. The three teen females, who were 15 and 16 years old, were unaware that they were part of the online experiment when they were interviewed by Dateline correspondent Rob Stafford. Stafford asked the girls if they provided personal information on their MySpace site and they told him that they did not post personal information. He also asked them if they would talk to a stranger online. The girls said that they would not. At one point in the interview, I was brought into the room and introduced to the girls as "Matt," their online "friend." The surprised girls were then told about all the personal information that "Matt" was able to find out about them. The three girls could have easily been Middletown, Connecticut's victims 8,9, and 10. They later acknowledged that they were relieved to know that I was a police detective rather than an adult looking to harm them. In this case the girls were lucky. In a two month period in the Spring of 2006, some 17 Connecticut teen females were victims of sexual

assaults by people they met online. Some of these girls were young middle school students. Other locations throughout the country have had similar cases.

Another result of the “Matt” experiment was the way in which the teen’s parents were totally unaware of what their teens were doing online. As I travel around doing parent programs on Internet safety, I see that many parents are not as technologically savvy as their children. Because of this, teens are often allowed to police themselves online.

The “Matt” experiment, as reported by Dateline NBC, clearly showed that teens are very vulnerable online. It also demonstrated that parents are often blindsided by their teens when it comes to knowing exactly what they are doing online.

As technology changes, we will be faced with further challenges when it comes to teens’ safety online. I see the next challenge being the web-enabled cellular phone. While parents struggle to monitor their child’s Internet use in the home, the cellular phone will provide web access where monitoring will be difficult. The cellular phone now has capabilities such as text messaging, instant messaging, e-mail, and web page access. Teens will now be able to leave their home and bring an extension of the home PC with them through their cell phone. Web cams will also become more common, leading to potential abuse as people will now be able to see each other while online. The ability of teens to have international “friends” online will pose an additional challenge to both parents and law enforcement.

There is no quick fix to the problem of online safety as it impacts our children. It will take vigilance by Government Officials, Schools, Law Enforcement, Internet service providers including social networking sites, as well as parents and teens themselves. I believe that industry safety standards as well as educational programs and public service announcements will go a long way as a first step. Thank you.

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SUMMARY OF THE WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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Law Enforcement Experience:

- 25 years law enforcement experience
- 15 years serving as a Detective in the Youth Division
- Served in an undercover capacity to detect online child predators
- Seven years experience in Child Computer Crimes in both investigations and education

Dateline NBC Online “Matt” Experiment:

- Participated in an experiment which tested Middletown, Connecticut teens for vulnerability with a 19 year old online stranger
- Seven Middletown, Connecticut teens from the ages of 12 to 16 were victims of sexual assaults by older males met on MySpace.com
- “Matt,” the role I played online, was easily able to make over 100 online “friends” in two week period
- Majority of 14 and 15 year olds with “private” pages allowed “Matt” on their page as a “friend”
- Personal information such as real names, where they live, home phone numbers, and actual dates of birth are readily given by teens online
- Use of “surveys” online reveal much personal information about a teen
- 19 year old “Matt” received a message suggesting an in-person meet
- Many parents not aware of what their child is doing online
- Many parents not technologically savvy about computers or the Internet

Future Challenges:

- Web enabled cellular phones will present new challenges in monitoring by parents
- Web cams will become more popular and lead to potential abuse by teens
- As social networking sites go international the potential to meet out of country friends will present new challenges

Solutions:

- There is no quick fix for teen online safety
- Cooperation from multiple entities as well as parents and teens is necessary
- Industry-wide safety standards are necessary
- Educational programs are critical