

16: THE INTERNET DATE

(More Web Challenges)



Criminal Offense to Prevent: Stalking & kidnapping

Presenting Challenge: Hiding a relationship from parents

SAMANTHA KNEW SHE should not have been talking to the young man (at least she thought he was around her age) in chat rooms without her parent's knowledge. She had made a deal with her mom and dad: For using her computer in her bedroom, her parents could monitor her web activity, and she wouldn't keep any secrets from them. Yet she had broken both rules, not only by erasing the evidence of Alan's existence in her life, but by telling no one about their planned rendezvous at the movie theatre.

As prearranged with Alan, Samantha excused herself, telling her parents that she was going to the restroom and getting a refill on her popcorn. However, once she reached the lobby, she looked around for someone who could be Alan.

At first she didn't see anyone matching his description, and then a handsome but much older man (he had to be at least 30) came up behind her, introducing himself as he pulled her into a tight hug.

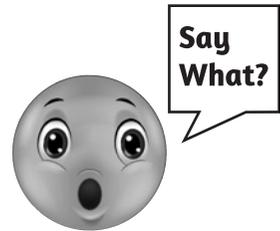
Samantha had still not recovered from the shock of Alan lying about his age, and now he was trying to convince her to go outside with him for just a minute to see his new van.

THIS SCENARIO INVOLVES A secret contact Samantha has planned online with Alan, someone represented to be about her own age. But

during the prearranged rendezvous when Samantha actually meets Alan at the movie theatre, she is disturbed not only by him being an adult but also his attempt to convince her to go outside to his van.

Perhaps face-to-face a teen may express misgivings about interacting with a stranger, but the internet isn't necessarily viewed the same way. Today's teen has grown up in a world where the internet has always been a large part of their lives. Getting them to see an entity where they regularly chat with friends, play games, and even engage in school activities as fraught with danger understandably can be a challenge. As illustrated by the lack of acknowledgement that this problem started with trusting an online connection, expect your teens to identify the following as initial ways Samantha can handle the situation:

1. Don't go with Alan.
2. Call for help.
3. Call for the police.
4. Call for parents.
5. Go back in the movies.
6. Go and tell parents what's going on.
7. Don't introduce him to parents.
8. Leave.
9. Don't go back online.
10. Report Alan [to the webmaster].



Against one's better judgment, it is possible to make decisions in cyber space that do not translate well into the real world. Regrettably, some have met people online, and it has cost them their freedom or even their very lives.

Consider the case of 19-year-old Aprina Paul, who disappeared after meeting a man online. Her burned body was recovered several days later from a fire pit in the man's backyard.³² Then there's the 14-year-old whose Facebook adult "friend" sent a taxi for her almost daily, which was how he circumvented being electronically monitored. Once at his place, he typically had sex with her – resulting in pregnancy. Eventually, he held her captive for months before she escaped.³³

Paradoxically, the internet is a great source for identifying news stories about teens exploited by persons they met online. Search for cases involving teens in your area to reinforce the point of how perilous such associations can be.

While a parent's goal is not to incite paranoia, one can never be too careful in cyberspace. For example, reporting Alan's actions (presumably the fact that he is an adult trying to date a minor) to a webmaster may be ineffective or even harmful. Alan, as a webmaster, could possibly use a parent's reporting as a way to extract more personal information about Samantha's whereabouts. Dealing with a situation like this requires what your teen may refer to as "meatspace"* rules and actions such as those chronicled below:

1. Teens and parents enter into an agreement of transparency concerning all Internet activity including, but not limited to:
 - a. Passwords furnished to parents for sites such as Facebook.
 - b. Teens being subjected to surprise inspections.
 - c. Appropriate filters in place.
 - d. No personal information, including electronic photographs, posted without prior approval.
2. If contact is made in the real universe with anyone initially met online, even if it appears to be a chance encounter, leave that person immediately and contact a parent.
3. Leaving means getting to the most public place possible. Avoid a route to safety which an offender can use to capture you.
4. Once in a safe place to report what occurred, avoid downplaying a troubling circumstance and explain in detail exactly what is occurring in order to get help. An attempt to minimize one's own involvement or protect a stranger has slowed down many investigations, positioning predators to harm more victims.



The list above is not exhaustive. Parents are strongly urged to consult resources such as the FBI's "Parents Guide to Internet Safety."**

*Meatspace is seen as the opposite of cyberspace (urbandictionary.com. (Accessed 1/6/14)

**The guide can be accessed using this link: fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide.

Guardians should also be mindful that older teens seeking to engage in relationships with younger teens can also be problematic given that sometimes younger people represent themselves as being older. Case-in-point is Zac's plight, a 19-year-old who is now a registered sex offender "after having sex with a girl he met on the dating app *Hot or Not*, who claimed she was 17," but she was really 14.³⁴

Given that the Internet has only been popular since the 1990s, older individuals are likely to hold a healthy skepticism about people met online. And if we want teens to position themselves to be their own bosses, exposing them to the types of ploys criminals use to trick youth is essential.

The online-generated Slender Man³⁵ horror character, who encourages others to kill victims to please him, inspired two 12-year-old girls in Wisconsin to stab a friend 19 times that they had lured into the woods.³⁶ Other online dangers such as the fire and cinnamon challenges dare teens to engage in behavior that can lead to injury or death. (See the *Washington Post Guide* in Resource Notes to familiarize yourself with these and other trends.) Identify cyber risks like identify theft, claim-your-prize ploys, and others as listed in the FBI's guide and the National Crime Prevention Council's Website.*

*ncpc.org/topics/internet-safety/tips-for-parents