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Catfish: Why Parents Need To Discuss It With Their Teens

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Gun control is a topic of concern that has been making headlines, and for good reason. Parents are always worried about the subject of weapons when it comes to our kids, but not all weapons are necessarily guns.

Sometimes we forget that a *keyboard* or *keypad* can be a weapon, too. The recent stories publicizing an internet hoax known as Catfish is another reason for all of us to educate ourselves on the dangers both adults and kids face online. The Internet is a valuable educational tool -- yet it can become a weapon when placed in the wrong hands and used for bullying and harassment.

Cyber-bullets can be released by unexpected predators. Maybe a disgruntled client, a former friend, an ex-lover or an Internet troll. Maybe they don't like your sexuality, maybe they don't like your beliefs, maybe they didn't like your restaurant or a service you provided -- maybe they just don't like you.

We have heard the horror stories of cyberbullying over the past several years, and they never get easier to hear. Catfishing is an extended branch of online harassment that takes cruelty to a new level.

What is Catfish? (Besides the obvious literal answer of being a type of fish.): Urban Dictionary's most popular answer defines a catfish as: "someone who pretends to be someone they're not using Facebook or other social media to create false identities, particularly to pursue deceptive online romances."

I am not convinced people (parents included) understand the damage that a cyber-bullet can cause, or the emotional turmoil a person can go through when they are a victim of a ruse like Catfish. Most kids are still under the belief that it won't happen to them; they are invincible. I would venture to say some parents believe that too.

As adults, especially for professionals and business owners, cyber-bullets can be both financially and emotionally lethal. While they can be deadly to careers, they can be even more harmful to young lives when aimed at teens and tweens already struggling with puberty.

Why do parents need to discuss Catfish and other stories of online dangers? The recent Florida sex sting operation with over fifty men arrested is a perfect example of why the lines of communication need to be open between parents and children. These sexual predators targeted children online and posed as teens when in reality they were teachers, businessmen, students and tourists ranging in age from 19 to 60.

Chris Duque, a former Police Detective who has been studying online predators for over thirty years, has created false personas to lure these types of suspects."It's easy to be duped online, very easy," Duque said. "The thing with the Internet is your five senses are somewhat limited and what you see online may not be what you're really going to get."

This may seem like common sense to many, however when adults and kids are desperate for friendship, they will let their guard down. Duque continues, "If you go online, you're vulnerable because the perpetrators will know there's something dysfunctional about you emotionally and psychologically, and they'll prey on that."

Catfish, sextortion, sexual predators, cyberbullying, cyber-stalking and other dangers we face online are not going away anytime soon, and we need to continuously talk to our kids about Internet safety and privacy issues. As parents, we should make it a priority to teach our kids the importance of watching their language and how they interact with others online -- that respecting others both in person and online goes hand and hand. This lesson should start from the moment a child is given a keypad of any kind.

Takeaway tips:

• Never post questionable comments or photos that can come back to haunt you.
• Talk to your kids (especially tweens and teens) about speaking to strangers online -- the fact is, they shouldn't be speaking to online strangers. Period. Set up boundaries, show them examples of how Internet predators prey on children AND adults (such as the Catfish story). Kids can relate better to real-life stories--share them.
• Limit the personal information they are allowed to put online. Their address, phone number, full name, financial information, etc. should never be allowed -- ever.
• Never share their passwords with anyone (except their parents).
• Parents and teens: It is never too late to start building and maintaining your online reputation. Make sure it is a positive one.
• Secure your privacy settings on all your social networking sites. Repeat this weekly.

Be an educated parent, you will have safer teens.

Ref.: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sue-scheff/catfish_b_2529769.html?utm_hp_ref=tw

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