It is surprisingly easy for children to become involved in Internet crime — either as victim or perpetrator.

Parents who would not permit a stranger into their home to talk with their child unsuper-vised think nothing of permitting their child to talk with cyber-pals unrestricted. However, unlike in the real world, it is impossible to verify that a cyber-pal is who he says he is.

In a class on *The Internet and Your Child*, we watched while the instructor pretended to be a 14 year-old girl. Within 20 minutes, a man exposed himself (live by his webcam) to the class believing he was corresponding with a girl in a children's chat room.

Other children ruin their lives by becoming involved in crimes – sometimes without realizing it. The thrill of sneaking into someone's computer and tweaking it, or the lure of quick money or free products, may tempt kids.

Some kids may suspect that what they're doing is wrong, but are sure they won't get caught or, if they do get caught, that the sentence will disappear at age 18 – but they're wrong.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the child most likely to be involved in Internet crimes is the "good kid" – one who is bright, does well in school, and who has friends and involved parents. Unfortunately, few parents know what to look for or what to do to decrease the chance of their child being involved in Internet crimes.

By using the tips below, you will reduce the likelihood your child will be involved in Internet crime, either as victim or perpetrator.

A dozen things that can help keep your kids safe.

1. Install the children's computer(s) in a common family area and have the screen facing the center of the room. It is far easier to monitor length and content of activity.

2. Develop and agree upon a list of family computer use rules. Include how long kids may use the computer, which sites they may visit, where and whom they may chat with, what information they can give over the Internet, etc. When you have made a list, both parents and children should sign the paper. Then post it by the computer as a reminder to all.

3. Balance your children's computer time with activities in the real world, especially physical activities. Time on the computer competes with time spent with friends, family,

exercise, schoolwork, etc. Kids need these activities as well.

4. Distinguish between a "friend" and a "cyber-pal." Friends are people you have met, and you can verify the truth of who they are. Cyber-pals are people you have only met on the Internet and cannot verify. It doesn't mean they are false or bad, only that you can't "prove" they are who they say they are.

5. Periodically discuss what information you may share over the Internet. Do not give out *any* personal information over the Internet – even to cyper-pals and friends. With all the search capabilities on the Internet, it is easy for a predator to find where you live and deduce family schedules.

6. Teach your child to understand and respect intellectual property rights. Copying electronically stored material may not seem as bad to children as taking a physical item, but it is still stealing. Gone is the time when you could bootleg music, images, and software with impunity.

7. Similarly, be aware of the quantity of your child's possessions – particularly music, software, and games. Is it in keeping with your child's income? Music and software that were not purchased can lead to stiff fines regardless of the child's age.

8. Keep an up-to-date list of approved online friends that your child may correspond with. This list should contain each person's e-mail address, real name, street address, and phone number. Post a copy of the list by the computer and hide one away. This list tends to disappear when children are lured away. It is not only a list of suspects, but also of possible confidants.

9. Establish a rule about when your child may meet a cyper-pal in person. For example, you may decide that your child or teen may meet a cyber-pal *only* with explicit parent permission and a parent accompanying him or her.

10. Routinely check the computer activity. Look at history files and bookmarks for use of sites that you are unfamiliar with, and check them out. If they are inappropriate, delete them. Look for gaps in the history files or for bookmark, history, and/or cache files that are empty when you did not delete them. This includes documents, cookies, and trash.

11. Watch for signs of secrecy, addiction, and unauthorized e-mail accounts. Secrecy might be the child turning off the screen or computer when you come in the room, or logging off the Internet when you get home. Addiction might show itself as no interest in anything but the computer, more Internet pals than real friends, or poor hygiene.

12. Consider using blocking, filtering, or monitoring controls on your computer. However, remember that every system has its limitations and needs to be checked period-ically. Establish the rule that the system be changed only by the parent.

Personal information a predator can use to locate your child.		
☐ age	☐ birth date	☐ phone number
☐ sex	☐ name	☐ nick name
☐ location	☐ address	☐ graduating class
☐ school's name		☐ what sports he/she plays
☐ year in school		☐ his/her team's name

Resources.

The Internet and Your Child workshop. To find one near you visit http://www.theinternetandyourchild.org.

Telling Isn't Tattling by Kathryn Hammerseng. (Parenting Press, Seattle, Wash.) This children's book helps kids understand what tattling is and when it is appropriate to ask for adult help.

The Trouble with Secrets by Karen Johnsen. (Parenting Press, Seattle, Wash.) A children's book that distinguishes between secrets and surprises. No one should ask a child to keep a secret from his or her parents.

The Parenting Press website has books on setting limits and dealing with kids' frustration and anger when they don't get their way.

Children and the Internet

It is surprisingly easy for a child or teen to become involved in Internet crime — either as victim or perpetrator.

12 things you can do to protect your child.