

New online gadgets bring danger of predators, police say

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Gadgets such as camera phones and computers have found their ways under many Christmas trees, but police say when the high-tech toys go online, they could invite cyberpredators into the home.

The RCMP is reminding parents that high-tech gifts come with responsibility, and that parents should warn children of dangers that accompany gadgets with wireless and internet capability.

"You have to be cognizant of who you are talking to and who actually can gain access to your information," said Heather Harding-Legault, a senior investigator with the National Child Exploitation Co-ordination Centre (NCECC).

The NCECC is part of the federal government's national strategy to protect children from online sexual exploitation, and contributes to the RCMP's strategic priority on youth.

To demonstrate the threat posed by cyberpredators, a police officer chooses a site, logs in as "Tracy" and claims to be 12-year-old girl.

When the officer types in a phone number on the website, the phone rings almost instantly. Police want parents to be on guard against such intrusions.

CyberAngels.org, a U.S. website affiliated with the Guardian Angels, teaches parents how to protect their children online. The group suggests precautions including:

- Don't respond to flaming (provocation).
- Choose a genderless screen name.
- Don't flirt online, unless you're prepared for the consequences.
- Save offending messages and report them to your service provider.
- Don't give out any personal information about yourself or anyone else.
- Get out of a situation online that has become hostile; log off or surf elsewhere.

Signs of trouble:

- Long hours in the computer room.

- Closing windows on the computer when you enter room.
- Secrecy surrounding internet activities.
- Behavioural changes.
- Doing homework while on the internet in chat groups and getting behind with school work.
- Unexplained long distance telephone call charges.
- Refusal to say who they are talking to.
- Unexplained pictures on computer.