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Girl's abduction exposes extent of Internet luring

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With a report from AFP

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The tale of the 12-year-old British girl who ran away with a former U.S. marine she met on the Internet has police and parents concerned that it may be an extreme result of the sexual advances children receive over the Internet.

Shevaun Pennington was returned to her parents' arms after landing in Manchester yesterday afternoon, five days after she sparked an international search by disappearing to Paris with a 31-year-old ex-soldier whom she had met on-line.

Toby Studabaker, who grew up in Michigan and served in the U.S. military for more than three years, was arrested in downtown Frankfurt yesterday on charges of abduction, police said.

German officials said that they would make a decision on whether to extradite Mr. Studabaker, who will appear before a magistrate today.

Police sources said the girl appeared to be unharmed, but alleged that a computer used by Mr. Studabaker yielded child pornography as well as evidence indicating that he knew Shevaun was 12, not 18 or 19 as he had said to relatives.

Greater Manchester police said the girl's relationship with Mr. Studabaker intensified over months, from chat-room discussions to e-mails and personal letters. His family said they'd discussed marriage.

While Shevaun's case has attracted international attention, many more go unnoticed. Authorities warn that as many as one out of every five young people who use the Internet regularly receive unwanted sexual advances.

In a 2001 U.S. survey of 1,501 people aged 10 to 17 who often log on-line, the University of New Hampshire found that 19 per cent reported being the target of unwanted sexual solicitations. David Finkelhor, director of the university's Crimes Against Children Research Center and one of the study's authors, said certain groups -- girls, older teenagers, frequent Web or chat-room users and troubled young people -- were most vulnerable.

Katya Gifford, program manager for the Cyberangels, an on-line safety and education group based in Allentown, Penn., says she hears of cases every week in her small city that involve pedophiles using the Internet.

"I think it's becoming much more common," said Ms. Gifford, who has given presentations on Internet safety across the United States and in Canada.

She worries that the Internet allows pedophiles to connect and share child pornography, which could encourage them to act on their fantasies.

Detective Sergeant Frank Goldschmidt of child pornography section of the Ontario Provincial Police says his unit has been much busier since Canada amended its Criminal Code last July to include the offence of Internet luring, which makes it a crime for an adult to use the Web to entice minors for sexual purposes.

"Obviously, it's created more work, but it's also given us that tool to meet up with people who are interested in luring, usually for the purposes of having sex with them," he said. "We can get these people in custody."

Both Det. Sgt. Goldschmidt and Ms. Gifford warn that adults will often build a long-term relationship with a young person before suggesting they hook up.

"Predators do not go on-line, pick a child and then ask to meet them that day," Ms. Gifford said. "They're very patient: they can spend months and even a year or two building a relationship with a child on-line."

Because the Internet is often accessed from home, it can engender a false sense of security, Det. Sgt. Goldschmidt said. "They feel comfortable, they feel that they know them and they figure, 'Well, what the heck, I might as well meet this guy.' "

On the flip side, the pervasive teenage desire to be older can also be a trap, Ms. Gifford says.

"The Internet is a great place to lie. We see a lot of teenagers who sexual role-play on-line, and that's a way for them to explore ideas that they might not physically off-line be ready to deal with," she said.

"Teenagers can walk right into some of these things thinking they're calling the shots. And the situation then gets out of hand."



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