

Web Safeguards

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Hortencia Franco was so afraid her 13-year-old daughter could become a target of sexual predators on the Internet that she took preventive measures.

"I took the computer out of her room," said Franco, 38, of Ceres. "Now we have the computer in the living room. Just to be safe rather than sorry."

Law enforcement officials hope other parents do the same, and they want to educate the public about the threat of Internet predators, who will stop at nothing once they identify a young target.

Franco knew enough to remove the computer from her teenage daughter's room, but she said she wanted to learn more about keeping her kids safe on the Web. So she attended a recent Internet safety community forum held by the Stanislaus County Office of Education. About 70 people were there to hear accounts from detectives who track sexual predators who hunt on the Internet.

"I just need to be more aware of who she is chatting with and who she is calling on the phone," Franco said.

Like others in the audience, Franco was shocked by what she learned — such as the Ceres man who was collecting child pornography off the Web and stealing children's underwear.

The man was stealing the underwear from homes while working as a washing machine repairman, said Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department Detective Lydell Wall, who is also a member of the Sacramento Valley Hi-Tech Crimes Task Force.

"They usually never destroy their collection of pornography," Wall said. "They keep it in large quantities."

Wall said the 42-year-old man was living with his elderly parents in an immaculate home. But his room, where he sat for hours surfing the Web, was filled with garbage, broken furniture, computer equipment and his trophies — children's underwear.

"It was a pretty disgusting sight," Wall said.

Threat is now mobile

The threat to children is changing with technological advances, Wall said. Cell phones and other small devices allow everyone to surf the Web while on the move.

"The Internet is now going mobile," Wall said. "For the most part, sexual predators (used to be) confined to their homes."

Such social networking Web sites as MySpace and Facebook provide another playground for sexual predators, Wall said. The task force detectives have investigated men trying to lure children by posing as boys, posting photos of teenagers and lying about their age on profile pages.

"They go where the kids are going to hang out," Wall said after telling the audience about a man in his 30s posing as

a 19-year-old on MySpace and chatting with teenage girls in the Turlock area.

"Just because you use MySpace at home doesn't mean you're safe," Wall said. "When you're online, you open the door to them."

Some sexual predators are trying to evade authorities monitoring the Web for child pornography trafficking by sending hidden data inside seemingly innocent photos.

Embedded in the photo file could be a picture of a sexually victimized child, Wall said.

Focus on predators

The Sacramento Valley HiTech Crimes Task Force started focusing on sexual predators in 1999 and has been involved in more than 100 arrests on charges of child pornography trafficking or trying to lure a child into illegal sexual activity through the Internet, Wall said. About 60 percent of those arrests have resulted in convictions, and other cases are pending, he said.

The task force has investigated and monitored more than 2,000 sexual predators nationwide.

Because the task force includes investigators from federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, jurisdictions don't apply to detectives such as Wall.

He said they have handled cases that originated from New Zealand to Modesto, such as the one that led to them to a junk-cluttered Modesto garage.

Wall showed the audience photos of an exercise weight bench placed to cover a large desk filled with computer equipment.

After confiscating the computer hardware and conducting a forensic analysis, Wall said investigators found 300,000 images of child pornography.

"This guy was gearing up to launch his own child pornography Web site," Wall said.

There are two kinds of Internet sexual predators — the ones who collect and categorize child pornography, and the ones who view and discard child pornography, he said. Both will stop at nothing once they have a child target in their sights.

"We can park a patrol car right in front of them, and they won't even see us," Wall said. "They get some sort of tunnel vision. Nothing short of incarceration will stop these guys."

U.S. attorneys in the Eastern District of California have had some success recently in prosecuting Internet sexual predators, but U.S. Attorney McGregor Scott said it isn't enough.

"In the last two years, we've led the nation in indictments against sexual predators," Scott told the audience at the Internet safety forum, but added that investigators and prosecutors can't wage the war on their own.

"You have got to protect your children, because every minute of every day there is somebody out there on the Internet trying to find them, cultivate them and molest them," Scott said.

Education office hosted event

The Stanislaus County Office of Education put on last week's forum that focused on safe Internet use and predators who use e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs and social networking sites to harm children.

The event was geared toward parents, caregivers, junior high and high school students and educators.

The forum was part of Project Safe Childhood from the U.S. attorney general's office. One of the project's goals is to integrate federal, state and local efforts to investigate and prosecute cases involving child exploitation.

Michael Saunders, a fifth-grade teacher in Patterson, wants to do his own presentation and provide the information to students and their parents at Northmead Elementary School.

"I know our kids are now gaining more knowledge about technology and the Internet," Saunders said. "I don't want our parents to let their kids roam freely on the Internet."

Saunders was talking about "kids" such as 13-year-old Shannon from Salida.

Within two hours of logging into a chat room, a 34-year-old man had told the seventh-grader to undress, shave herself and perform sexual acts.

Shannon was Detective Ken Hedrick posing as a teenage girl to show the forum audience how quickly adults will circle around someone who seems to be a child or a teenager.

Within minutes, several men were asking Shannon about her age, her bra size and if she has ever flashed a man.

"A lot of it is just chatter, or what we call grooming the victim," Wall said. "But every once in a while, they slip in a question of a sexual nature."

One man started sending Shannon photos of teenage girls posing in their bikinis. The same man went as far as asking the teenage girl to strip to her underwear and perform a sexual act.

That's when Hedrick ended the chat by calling the man "a perv." Wall told the audience that even just asking a child to commit a sexual act in a chat room is against the law.

"You see how quickly these guys operate," Wall said. "It doesn't take very long."

Stanislaus County District Attorney Birgit Fladager said it is important to display the dangers to children with graphic details about the predators.

"By the time these cases get to a prosecutor's office, it's too late," Fladager said. "Someone has already been victimized."

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