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Internet Safety: Video Gaming Online Creates New Threat

This Week, KCRA 3 Investigates Internet Safety

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Many people grew up playing games like Pac-Man or Pong. Today's games not only look different, they open up a whole new universe that the Space Invader generation could never have imagined.

Just ask 15-year-old Kevin Luhdorff. He's a self-professed gamer.

"I really like being on the latest video games, because then I can show my friends and they can come over and play, too," Luhdorff said.

But Luhdorff doesn't just play with kids down the street or against the computer. If he wants to, his Nintendo can connect him to other players around the world.

"When you do go against another person, you are actually trying to outsmart another human being, another person who can actually think," Luhdorff explained.

Luhdorff sees it as an added challenge. For his parents, it's an added concern.

"It is interesting to be able to play a game with someone who is in Canada, Japan or something like that. Of course, you wonder what are the risks, how much information is going back and forth," said Mark Luhdorff, who is Kevin's father.

Here's the problem: Parents may know chat rooms or MySpace pages are a way for strangers to connect with kids. But they may not realize many video games open up the same avenues because some systems allow gamers to send messages to each other.

"We have had situations and cases where [predators] are using the gaming systems to try and lure the kids under the auspices of being one of the participants," said Lt. Bob Lozito, who is with the Sacramento Valley High Tech Crimes Task Force.

Lozito said the conversation starts with gaming, and could lead children to reveal personal information about themselves, where they go to school or what they do for fun.

Psychologist Anthony Urquiza, who is with the University of California Davis Medical Center, said a trust starts to build, and that's just what a predator wants.

"As we are sitting here today, there are people who are online, cruising, looking for relationships they started a couple of weeks ago, just on sports, or what's going on at school, they are going to increase the amount of sexuality in their

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conversations," Urquiza said.

Video game makers say there are safeguards. Some systems only let kids play with people they know.

Aaron Greenberg helped design Microsoft's Xbox.

"Parents can say 'Yes, I want my child to go online,' but I want to be able to say who their friends are, what kind of experiences they can have, indicate with voice or not. That's important to parents," Greenberg said.

On his system, Luhdorff has a list of blocked players; People he didn't know who tried to talk to him.

"I feel I am safe enough that if someone is trying to get close to me, I can push them back," Luhdorff said.

He also has parents who are paying very close attention.

"I am fortunate that when Kevin is on 'World War Craft,' he tells me things. I ask him," said Drisha Leggitt-Luhdorff, Kevin's stepmother.

"We are a little less paranoid than we used to be. Most of things my son Kevin does, we can still monitor from a far. We know what he's doing," Mark Luhdorff said.

Knowing what he's doing means "game over" for online predators.

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