

Risky Online Relationships

Essential Question

How can you tell when an online relationship is risky?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...

- compare and contrast stereotypes and realities when it comes to Internet “stranger danger.”
- learn guidelines for determining safe online relationships, especially with strangers or casual acquaintances.
- brainstorm ways to help teens avoid risky online behavior.

Materials and Preparation

- Read the **Communicating Safely Online Teacher Backgrounder (High School – see below)**
- Review the **Sheyna’s Situation Student Handout — Teacher Version (in box, see below)**
- Copy **Sheyna’s Situation Student Handout**, one for each student.

Note: Research suggests that lessons on Internet safety should not shy away from honest conversations about teen risk-taking, relationships, and sexuality. As such, this lesson deals with issues that may be difficult for both teachers and students to discuss openly. Please refer to the **Communicating Safely Online Teacher Backgrounder** for extra information on the content of this lesson, as well as tips for teaching sensitive topics.

Key Vocabulary –

online predator: a commonly used term for someone who uses the Internet to develop inappropriate relationships with kids or teens

stereotype: a popular belief about a group of people, based on assumptions that are often false

risky: potentially harmful to one’s emotional or physical well-being

manipulate: trying to influence somebody to do something they might not otherwise do, for one’s own benefit

introduction

Warm-up (5 minutes)

INTRODUCE the idea that the Internet thrives because people want to share with, learn from, and respond to others online. Point out that there are many different types of online interactions between people who don't know each other in an offline setting. These interactions are sometimes positive, and at other times they can make us feel uncomfortable.

ASK:

What are some examples of positive interactions between strangers online?

Sample responses:

- Selling your own products or possessions online
- Responding to internship or job opportunities online
- Leaving comments on other people's blogs, even if you don't know them personally
- Playing games or interacting in virtual worlds with people you don't know offline

What are some examples of uncomfortable interactions between strangers online?

Sample responses:

- Dealing with awkward friend requests from people you don't know well
- Receiving mean or creepy comments from strangers
- Getting spam or junk mail
- Seeing IMs from unknown screen names

POINT OUT that there are many different kinds of online encounters with strangers that may make us feel uncomfortable. Some are harmless and easy to laugh off or forget about. Other encounters might affect us, or our friends, more seriously.

teach 1

The Myths and Realities of "Online Predators"

ASK:

What are some common stereotypes of online predators?

Sample responses:

- Online predators are creepy old men
- They are interested in sexual things with little kids
- They pretend to be kids online and convince other kids to do things that they don't want to do
- They try to gain kids' trust and lure them offline to kidnap them

SHARE the following facts that debunk the online predator stereotype:

1. Teens are more likely to receive requests to talk about sexual things online from other teens or from young adults (ages 18 to 25) than they are from older adults.
2. The small percentage of adults that does seek out relationships with teens online are usually up-front about their age, and about their sexual interests.
3. Teens who develop an ongoing online connection with someone they don't know, or who are willing to talk about sexual things online, are more likely to find themselves in a risky online relationship.
4. Risky online relationships don't always involve total strangers; sometimes they involve people that teens have initially met offline.

ASK students if any of these facts surprise them, given what they have heard about online predators.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **risky**, and have volunteers suggest what the word might mean in this context. (Guide students to consider how flirty conversations online may seem exciting or flattering, but that they also have the potential to be upsetting or feel abusive. They should know that people may in fact say or do things online that they would not in person. Students should also know that they may feel used, uncomfortable, or violated while chatting with people online – whether it's with someone their own age or older.)

ENCOURAGE students to discuss how focusing on the online predator stereotype might make it harder to recognize other forms of risky online relationships. (Given that news stories emphasize that kids should beware of older adults who might try to take advantage of them, teens may think nothing of chatting with someone closer to their age – especially if that person is charming and flattering. In fact, it is important for teens to know that people closer to their age are more likely to coax them into uncomfortable situations online, or ask them to talk about inappropriate things.)

teach 2

Sheyna's Situation (20 minutes)

ASK students what the word *manipulate* means to them.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **manipulate**, drawing connections to student responses if possible.

ASK:

Why might it be tricky for people to recognize when they are being manipulated, especially online?

Some people try to manipulate you by pretending to be your friend, or making you feel understood and valued. Manipulation involves telling you things you want to hear, and gradually winning your trust before trying to control you.

EXPLAIN to students that they are going to read and analyze a story about a teen’s risky online relationship. This story will challenge them to think beyond online predator stereotypes. They should pay attention to how the relationship develops, and be on the lookout for anything that seems like manipulation.

DIVIDE students into pairs or groups of three or four.

DISTRIBUTE the **Sheyna’s Situation Student Handout**, one for each student. Give students 10 minutes to read the story and answer the questions on the handout in their groups.

INVITE groups to take turns sharing their answers to the questions on the handout. (Refer to the **Sheyna’s Situation Student Handout – Teacher Version** for sample answers.) Have all groups share their answers to the final question, which is about what advice they would give to Sheyna if they were her friend.

ASK:

Based on our answers to these questions, we’ve pointed out that this relationship is risky. Why does it matter? What’s at stake for Sheyna? What about Nick?

Encourage students to think about the emotional and legal issues that may arise when younger people develop romantic, or sexual, relationships online with older people, or even with people their own age. In this case, Sheyna may eventually feel embarrassed, upset, or used. Also, Nick – a young adult – is sending sexually explicit messages to a 14-year-old. This is illegal in most states.

HAVE students expand their advice to Sheyna into a general set of principles for teens to follow in avoiding risky online relationships. You may want to write these tips on the board, or project them for students to see. Be sure to include the following points:

- **Change it up.** If something feels like it might be getting risky, it probably is. But if you’re not sure, try changing the subject, making a joke, or saying you want to talk about something else. If you still feel pressured by or uncomfortable with the situation, you need to take further action.
- **Log off or quit.** You need to remember that at any time you can just stop typing and log off if a conversation gets uncomfortable online. You can also take action to block or report another user, or create a new account – whether for email, IM, or a virtual world – to avoid contact with that person again.
- **Know that it’s okay to feel embarrassed or confused.** It’s not always easy to make sense of situations that make you uncomfortable online. Nor is it easy to ask for help if you feel embarrassed about what you’ve experienced. These feelings are normal, and it’s okay to talk about them.
- **Talk to a friend or trusted adult.** Don’t be afraid to reach out. Even if you feel you can handle a tricky situation alone, it’s always a good idea to turn to friends, parents, teachers, coaches, and counselors for support.

closing

Wrap-up (5 minutes)

You can use these questions to assess your students’ understanding of the lesson objectives.

ASK:

Why is the term online predator misleading? What is the reality when it comes to risky online relationships?

Students should be aware of the stereotype that there are creepy older men lurking on the Internet, looking for kids. These kinds of online predators do exist, but they are not that common. Teens themselves and young adults are more likely than older adults to ask teens about sexual things online. Also, the small percentage of adults that are actually interested in developing relationships with teens online are usually upfront about their age and about their inappropriate intentions.

How can you avoid getting involved in risky online relationships?

Students should be wary of any online relationship with strangers or acquaintances who are older than they are. They should avoid flirting online with people they don't know face-to-face – whether it's a joke or whether it's serious – and be aware of people trying to manipulate them. If anything makes them feel uncomfortable, they should take action to stop it. They should also tell a trusted adult if they or their friends are in danger.

What are some examples of ways that people connect safely, responsibly, and positively with others online?

Students' answers will vary. Guide students to recognize that there are many benefits to networking, sharing, and collaborating with people online. It's a matter of knowing when relationships turn risky.

Risky Online Relationships

Directions

Read the story below. Then follow the directions on the next page.

Sheyna's first year of high school is off to a rough start. She was a CIT (counselor in training) at a day camp this summer and loved every minute of it. But now Sheyna misses camp and feels like she can't relate to her school friends anymore.

Every evening, Sheyna IMs (instant messages) Nick, the assistant director of her camp. He just graduated from college and lives a few hours away from her. Nick and Sheyna didn't know each other that well, but they exchanged screen names at the end of the summer. Sheyna talks to Nick about how much she misses camp and why she's frustrated with her friends. Nick is funny, flirty, and great at giving advice. "Those girls sound so immature," he tells her. "You might as well be in college. Seriously. You act way cooler than any 14-year-old I know."

A few weeks after school starts, Nick starts flirting with Sheyna more obviously:

kNicksFan93 did you know i thought about you at camp all the time?
i like couldn't take my eyes off you

sheybey101 :) why didn't you say anything!?

kNicksFan93 lol u were a CIT

kNicksFan93 ...and i want to make sure u will still be a CIT next summer....
so we can't tell anyone about this...

sheybey101 ummm i better be a CIT next summer! jk. (but seriously.)

kNicksFan93 parents freak out about this kind of stuff

kNicksFan93 u don't want me to lose my job, right?

sheybey101 of course not!

kNicksFan93 that's my girl. so glad that we can trust each other.

sheybey101:

Nick then asks Sheyna to send him some pictures of her in her bathing suit at camp. Sheyna is flattered, but it makes her feel a little uncomfortable. She decides to send the pictures anyway. Nick always talks about how mature she seems, and she doesn't want to make him think otherwise.

One day after soccer practice, Sheyna's best friend, Grace, asks to borrow her phone. Without trying to snoop, Grace sees a few sexts (sexually explicit text messages) between Sheyna and Nick. Grace doesn't know much about Nick, which is strange because she and Sheyna usually tell each other about their crushes. Grace decides to ask Sheyna about her relationship with Nick.

Directions

Based on the story you just read, answer the following questions as if you were Sheyna. Write your responses in the spaces provided.

1. How did you meet Nick, and how often do you talk to him?

2. Is Nick older than you? By how much?

3. Has Nick ever asked you to keep your relationship secret? In what way?

4. Have you ever felt uncomfortable with anything that Nick has asked you to do?

Now answer the following questions as if you were Grace, not Sheyna.

1. Does it seem like Nick is manipulating Sheyna? Why or why not?

2. Why might this be a sensitive issue for Sheyna?

3. What advice would you give Sheyna about her relationship with Nick?

Risky Online Relationships

The term “online predator” often conjures up the image of a creepy older man at a computer screen waiting to lure an unsuspecting child. The media reinforces this depiction, which is problematic because it does not fit with the kinds of risky relationships that are more common for teens. In reality, when online sexual solicitation does occur, it’s more likely to be between two teens, or between a teen and a young adult.

The following background information serves to clear up these misconceptions, providing information for teachers about the myths and realities of online sexual solicitation, as well as guidance on how to approach this sensitive topic. We recommend reading this information before teaching the lesson **Risky Online Relationships**.

Thinking Beyond “Online Predators”

Many adults fear that teens use the Internet to connect with strangers. In reality, most teens use the Internet to keep in touch with people they already know offline, or to explore topics that interest them. Studies show that it is most often teens who are psychologically or socially vulnerable that tend to take more risks online (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011; Ybarra et al., 2007). These at-risk teens might seek reassurance, friendship, or acceptance through relationships that they develop online. Given the disconnect between the “online predator” myth and the more realistic types of solicitation outlined above, it is important to strike the right tone when discussing the issue with teens.

We recommend that adults avoid fear-based messages with teens, as research indicates that teens are less responsive to this approach (Lanning, 2010). Teens are not likely to buy into the idea that they should avoid all contact with anyone they do not know online. After all, it is nearly impossible to connect with others online without talking to some people who are strangers. Rather than telling teens to never talk with strangers, it is more effective to have conversations about why certain online relationships are risky, and about how to avoid them.

The Truth About Risky Online Relationships

The information below is meant to clear up misconceptions about the common risks that kids face when they meet people online. It is based on research from the Crimes Against Children Research Center, the Internet Safety Technical Task Force, and Internet Solutions for Kids, Inc.

1. Teens, not children, are most likely to receive online sexual solicitations.

Online solicitors rarely target younger kids. This happens more frequently to younger teens (ages 14 to 17). People who solicit online are often upfront about their intentions. They may ask teens to talk about sex, to give out personal sexual information, to send sexy photos online, or to meet offline for a possible sexual encounter.

2. A teen is more likely to be solicited online by another teen or a young adult.

Contrary to popular belief, teens are more likely to be solicited online by similarly aged peers. It is true, however, that a very high majority of sexual solicitations online come from boys or men. Guiding teens to think more generally about avoiding risky online relationships, rather than telling them to fear predators, prepares them for the wider breadth of situations they may have to deal with online— not only the extreme cases.

3. The “predator-prey” label gives the wrong impression.

There is a range of behaviors that are not made clear by the predator-prey label. The behaviors can range from “not as risky” to “very risky,” as reflected in the chart below:

<p>Not As Risky</p>  <p>Very Risky</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive inappropriate spam through email and immediately send it to their junk mail • Accept a friend request online from a stranger and receive a sexually explicit online message thereafter, or joke around on a virtual world site and flirt with other avatars • Seek companionship or friendship on an online chat room, and develop an ongoing, risky relationship with a stranger
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In the most extreme cases of online solicitation – those involving older adults and teens – targets are usually aware of their solicitor’s true age and intentions. For the small percentage of teens who find themselves in this kind of situation, simply warning them against “unwanted contact” is not an effective strategy because they have likely grown to be comfortable with, and perhaps even dependent upon, their solicitor. Instead, we need to help teens understand why it is risky to flirt with people they meet online, how to recognize warning signs, and more broadly, why romantic relationships between teens and adults are unhealthy.

What Should Teens Know if Online Strangers Contact Them?

The term “grooming” is sometimes used to describe the process of an older adult coaxing a young person into sexual situations. For cases involving children, grooming may involve befriending the child, showing interest in his or her hobbies, exposing the child to sexually explicit material, and manipulating a child into a sexual encounter (Lanning, 2010).

The term is less commonly used for cases between teens, or between a teen and a young adult. Research also shows that teens who flirt and engage in online sexual talk with strangers – especially in chat rooms – are more likely to be solicited for sex (Ybarra et al., 2007).

The number one thing for teens to remember is that they should avoid flirting with or regularly talking to online strangers or online acquaintances, especially – but not only – if the person they are chatting with is older than they are.

Teens should also reflect on these questions if they communicate with someone they meet online:

- **Has this person asked to keep anything about our relationship a secret?**
- **Has this person hinted at or asked about anything sexual?**
- **Have I felt pressured or manipulated by this person?**
- **Do I feel true to myself – sticking to my values – when I communicate with this person?**

If teens feel uncomfortable during a conversation with an online stranger, they should:

- **Change it up.** If something feels like it might be getting risky, it probably is. But if teens are not sure, they should try changing the subject, making a joke, or saying they want to talk about something else. If they still feel pressured or uncomfortable, they need to take further action.
- **Log off or quit.** Teens need to remember that at any time they can just stop typing and log off if a conversation gets uncomfortable online. They can also take action to block or report another user, or create a new account – whether for email, IM, or virtual world – to avoid contact with that person again.
- **Know that it’s okay to feel embarrassed or confused.** It’s not always easy to make sense of situations that make teens uncomfortable online. Nor is it easy for them to ask for help if they feel embarrassed about what they’ve experienced. They should know these feelings are normal.
- **Talk to a friend or trusted adult.** Teens should know that it’s okay to reach out. Even if they feel they can handle a tricky situation alone, it’s always a good idea for teens to turn to friends, parents, teachers, coaches, and counselors for support.

Teaching Strategies for Sensitive Topics

Setting Ground Rules

It can be very difficult to talk to teens about risky online relationships. Creating a safe space for open discussion is particularly important for lessons that deal with sensitive topics. Consider doing an activity with your class that builds trust among them, and then spend five to ten minutes with them developing some ground rules before teaching the **Risky Online Relationships** lesson. Invite students to suggest some discussion guidelines for themselves. Encourage them to consider the following:

- **Active Listening.** Show your classmates that you not only hear what they have to say, but that you also care.
- **Confidentiality.** Agree not to share personally identifying information from the group discussion with people outside the class.
- **Step Up, Step Back.** Be self-aware of your class participation, and make sure that everyone has an opportunity to share his or her opinions.
- **Respect.** Strive to be non-judgmental and open minded regarding different points of view.
- **Use “I” Statements.** Own one’s statements and avoid using generalizing comments with “we,” “they,” or “you,” which can communicate blame.

Provide Supportive Resources

Teens may react to conversations about emotional manipulation and risky relationships in different ways. Consider concluding the lesson by mentioning a few resources available to students at your school, such as guidance counseling, health services, and talking to other teachers. These resources may help kids practice safe behavior online long after your lesson on **Risky Online Relationships** is over.

You may wish to share the following Web resources with teens:

- That’s Not Cool (www.thatsnotcool.com)
- MTV’s “A Thin Line” Campaign (www.athinline.org)

Talking to Parents

Send home the **Risky Online Relationships Family Tip Sheet**.

Research

- The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. *Enhancing Child Safety & Online Technologies: Final Report of the Internet Safety Technical Task Force*. 2008.
- Lanning, K. “Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis.” 2010. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- McBride, N. “‘Stranger-Danger’ Warnings Not Effective at Keeping Kids Safer.” 2011. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. www.missingkids.com.
- Subrahmanyam, K. and Šmahel, D. *Digital Youth: The Role of Media in Development*. 2011. Springer, New York.
- Ybarra, M. L., Espelage, D. L., and Mitchell, K. J. “The Co-occurrence of Internet Harassment and Unwanted Sexual Solicitation Victimization and Perpetration: Associations with Psychosocial Indicators.” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Health (2007). 41, pp. S31-S41.

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Directions

Based on the story you just read, answer the following questions as if you were Sheyna. Write your responses in the spaces provided.

1. How did you meet Nick, and how often do you talk to him?

Sheyna met Nick when she was working as a CIT at camp. He was the assistant director. They didn't really know each other at camp, but they exchanged screen names at the end of the summer. They've developed a relationship through instant messaging, and they talk every night.

2. Is Nick older than you? By how much?

Nick just graduated college and Sheyna is a freshman in high school. Nick is probably seven or eight years older.

3. Has Nick ever asked you to keep your relationship secret? In what way?

Nick tells Sheyna they can't tell anyone about their relationship because parents freak out about "this kind of stuff," meaning their age difference and/or their job difference at camp. He also tells Sheyna that he's glad he can trust her.

4. Have you ever felt uncomfortable with anything that Nick has asked you to do?

Nick asked Sheyna to send a picture of herself in her bathing suit at camp, which made her feel kind of uncomfortable. Nick has also been sexting Sheyna (sending sexual text messages to her). Guide students to discuss what would happen if Sheyna did not admit to Grace that she felt uncomfortable. Would that change this situation?

Now answer the following questions as if you were Grace, not Sheyna.

1. Does it seem like Nick is manipulating Sheyna? Why or why not?

Students may have mixed responses, but they should ultimately recognize that Nick is being manipulative. He says things like “you don’t want me to lose my job, do you?” and tells Sheyna that she’s more mature than most girls her age. Sheyna might think that Nick is just flirting with her. But it seems like Nick has more influence in this relationship than Sheyna does, and he’s guiding it to be both sexual and secret. Nick also asked Sheyna to send him sexy pictures, which is risky. We don’t know what will happen to those photos, and even if nothing does, Sheyna was uncomfortable with the request.

2. Why might this be a sensitive issue for Sheyna?

Guide students to recognize that Sheyna misses camp a lot and doesn’t feel like she can relate to her friends at school anymore. She likes talking to Nick about camp, and she vents to him about her friend issues. Nick flirts with Sheyna, too. She’s flattered that someone older thinks she’s mature and attractive.

3. What advice would you give Sheyna about her relationship with Nick?

Sheyna needs to know that her online relationship with Nick is risky, and if she continues it she could be in danger. Sheyna misses camp and is having a tough time with friends at school, and it’s important to be sensitive to that. But to stay safe, Sheyna needs to realize that Nick appears to be manipulating her, and she should cut off their relationship before it goes any further. Friends who are concerned about Sheyna’s situation should also remember that they can, and should, seek help from a trusted adult if they think Sheyna is taking dangerous risks.