

NEWS

# Digital predators, teen victims, Part 3: Surviving and changing sexual assault culture



Most sexual assaults are devastating, but victims learn to find a new normal and there are tips on how to move forward as well as how to help teens stay safe. (Illustration by Jeff Goertzen, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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The mother of a 15-year-old assault victim stands in court, glances at the man her daughter met on the Internet and, knees shaking, begins to read.

“I never thought it possible that my daughter would be a victim of any crime,” she says, “nor that my husband and I would ever be considered victims of anything.”

Yet the man Mom faces has pleaded guilty to unlawful sexual intercourse not just with her daughter but with three other teenage girls, including a 13-year-old.

Until her daughter faced an assailant, Mom – like most of us – didn’t truly grasp the staggering power of the Internet, a digital world where ruthless, soulless predators come lurking.

“Most Internet-initiated sex crimes,” states the New England Journal of Public Policy, “involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce young adolescents into sexual encounters.”



“Most such offenders are charged with crimes, such as statutory rape, that involve nonforcible sexual activity with victims who are too young to consent to sexual intercourse with adults.”

An organization called Common Sense Media cautions online connections often are made in chat rooms, on social media, or in chat areas of multiplayer games such as Roblox and Minecraft.

Still, not even the 15-year-old victim’s father, a technology geek with deep knowledge of both the Internet and the extraordinary reach of smartphones, could save his daughter from allowing a man she’d never met in person to enter the family home.

Consider that the U.S. Department of Justice reports that an estimated 60 percent of child sex abuse cases involve acquaintances.

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Perhaps more troubling is that a national survey found that one in nine girls under the age of 18

A coffee mug my sister gave me states, “Read, rise, resist.” Let’s start there.

## Internet stalkers

The image of an older man ensnaring a teenage girl over the Internet is familiar. Less known, however, is the fact that many predators are teens or young adults.

A nonprofit called Child Lures Prevention reports, “Nearly one-third of sexual offenders are aged 12-19, teens themselves.”

The man who assaulted the 15-year-old – a girl we are calling Jane Doe because she is a minor and a sexual assault victim – was 18 years old when the incident occurred.

Now 21, he just started serving a sentence of 180 days in jail and also became a registered sex offender.

“Meeting someone over social media is a very risky situation,” cautions victim rights attorney Michael Fell. “Part of the issue is that just because you’re talking online, doesn’t mean you know them.”

Kal Kaliban, head of the Orange County District Attorney’s sexual assault unit, oversees a massive operation that takes up an entire floor of a building in downtown Santa Ana.

Kaliban estimates 80 percent of sexual assault cases involve children and that his office handles, on average, a case a week involving a digital predator.

“The Internet is a tool for these predators and,” Kaliban allows, “unfortunately, parents don’t know what’s going on under their roofs.”

To combat Internet predators, Kaliban and other experts explain that parents need to monitor their children’s smartphones daily as well as their kids’ apps and texts. Additionally, parents should ask their children who they are communicating with on the Internet.

Those are good, sensible and practical suggestions that any parent should follow. Still, let’s admit that warnings about Internet predators have been broadcast loud and clear for more than a decade.

Protecting your child from smartphone danger has become somewhat akin to trying to protect a sandcastle on the beach. There are waves of digital hunters who are experts in breaking down a child’s defenses.

Additionally, Kaliban warns, “Kids tend to think that they’re invincible, that nothing’s going to happen to them.”

But in reality, Kaliban cautions, “Kids don’t know who they’re talking to on the other end, get lured very easily and the result can change their lives in a horrible way.”

Orange County District Attorney chief of staff Susan Kang Schroeder points out, for example, that in

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Common Sense Media makes it simple. “Never share a phone number, address, or even last name with someone (you’ve) never met. “

But that’s only the beginning.

## **Know your rights**

A common theme emerged while I interviewed victims, parents and experts about sexual assault: Knowledge is power.

For anyone, and especially for young people such as Jane Doe, there should be no confusion about what constitutes undue sexual pressure and how to handle unwanted activity.

“When you’re engaging in sexual activity, consent is about communication,” declares the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization. “And it should happen every time.”

Called RAINN, short for Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, the nonprofit partners with more than 1,000 local providers, operates the helpline for the Department of Defense and runs the National Sexual Assault Hotline, 800-656-HOPE.

In a word, RAINN has credibility. If nothing else, share the following two paragraphs – please.

“Giving consent for one activity, one time, does not mean giving consent for increased or recurring sexual contact. For example, agreeing to kiss someone doesn’t give that person permission to remove your clothes.

“You can withdraw consent at any point if you feel uncomfortable,” RAINN stipulates. “It’s important to clearly communicate to your partner that you are no longer comfortable with this activity and wish to stop.”

California law describes consent this way: “The person must act freely and voluntarily and have knowledge of the nature of the act or transaction involved.”

Under California law, you must be 18 or older to be able to consent.

For unlawful sexual intercourse with a person under 18 – commonly called statutory rape – punishments vary depending on the age of the offender as well as the age of the victim. A misdemeanor can include up to a year imprisonment; felonies can require up to four years in prison.

The punishments for rape are usually far harsher. In California, rape is defined by physical violence, threats, intimidation, someone unable to comply.

On RAINN’s website, there are pages of information covering a wide range of sexual assault issues as well as tips.

For parents with teens, the following suggestion may have the most impact: “Use your own experience to tell a safety story.

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As I write this column, Jane Doe shares that with her assailant's sentencing in September and his incarceration this month, she feels for the first time that she is starting to heal.

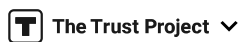
Still, the legacy of the assault lingers – and likely always will.

In her Victim Impact Statement, Jane Doe writes, "Girls shouldn't have to feel scared when they go out. Girls should not be afraid of walking to their cars or walking home, (to) school or to work.

"Girls shouldn't be so afraid that (they) have to carry rape alarms, rape whistles, tasers, mace, pepper spray or anything else that is a defense tool.

"Too many girls today live in fear."

Jane Doe is right. It's time we change our culture of assault and denial.



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