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"Because I can" - When kids act out violent fantasies online

All kids act out fantasies online, pretending to be someone or something they're not. But sometimes they act out violent fantasies online, too. Twenty seventh-graders sat quietly in the library, not quite sure who I was or why they were seated there. I looked around at the group. These were typical suburban, well-mannered kids. They lived in a town with good schools, safe streets, and PTA bake sales. I didn't expect any surprises. (Now, for you parents and teachers out there, you know what happened next.)

I asked them how often they used the Internet and what they did online. Each responded that they used it daily. Most admitted to chatting online, surfing music and sports sites, and sending instant messages and e-mail to friends. Some had set up their own Web sites. I received typical responses to my typical questions.

Then I asked them what they did online that their parents wouldn't want them to do. (I am always amazed how many kids confess outrageous things to me, just to be helpful.) That's when it got interesting. A few kids admitted to setting up a Web site that made fun of an overweight girl in the school. They told others in school about the site, and the girl was very upset, understandably. They put up a fake profile on AOL, pretending to be her. (These kids had way too much time on their hands.)

A few others admitted to using a parent's credit card to access adult sites. (It had somehow never occurred to them that a bill would eventually arrive for the pornography service.) Some had been thrown off AOL for using vulgar language or provoking fights online. But the one story I will always remember was from a soft-spoken, shy and intelligent boy, with sandy-colored hair. He was a top student, the kind of kid you knew never got into trouble. He raised his hand and confessed to sending out death threats via e-mail. This got my attention quickly.

We talked a bit about his life. He said that he doesn't get into trouble in "rl" (real life, for us non-geeks). His homework is turned in on time, and he comes straight home after school and listens to his parents. But he sends out death threats online. When I probed more, he said that he would never do anything wrong, because he's afraid of getting caught and getting into trouble. He also likes being a "good kid."

He thought that it might be fun to act out his fantasies online. He also was convinced that he couldn't get caught. When I asked him why he did it, he said simply, "Because I can." He is a good kid. He's the kind of kid that you'd want your children to be friends with, the one we refer to when we say "Why can't you be more like...?" He never forgets to say please or thank you. He'd never dream of threatening anyone offline. But online he's not a well-mannered honors student. Online he's the tough and violent kid he always fantasized about being. He plays at being someone else. It's the cyberspace version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And he does it from the safety of his bedroom, after his homework is finished.

The only problem is that when a death threat arrives via e-mail, the recipient doesn't know that this innocuous honors student sent it—to the recipient, it's a serious threat. It's also a serious threat when law enforcement traces him to his house and knocks on the door.

“Dear Jennifer, I am going to kill you.”

At WiredSafety.org, we help cyberstalking victims find their stalkers and prosecute them. They usually come to us when they are already hysterical with fear. One case, where the stalker threatened to kill a terrified mother and her teenage daughter, became a personal quest for Kelley Beatty, my former deputy executive director and former head of our cyberstalking team.

The mother sent us a frantic e-mail. She had been stalked online. The stalker threatened to kill her and her daughter. The stalker also knew personal details about her—offline details, such as her address and full real name. He also knew her telephone number. She had already been to her local police, but they didn't seem to take her fears seriously. She was afraid for her safety and that of her teenage daughter. She had missed several days of work, and was under medical treatment for the stress.

It didn't take Kelley long to figure out how the stalker had this information about the mother. She had included it in her ICQ profile. Getting her telephone number was as easy as accessing the White Pages online and looking her up, using the name and address she had voluntarily supplied to the world—and her stalker. She had also mentioned her daughter in chats, and the stalker apparently had picked up this information. (The mother was immediately advised of this, and removed the personal information. Kelley taught her how to surf anonymously.)

When an online stalking reveals that the stalker has offline information, the case is taken very seriously by us, and should be taken very seriously by law enforcement. Kelley stepped up the investigation. Luckily, the stalker had left a trail of personal information as well. This allowed Kelley and her cyberstalking team to identify him easily. Kelley contacted the stalker and confronted him with the fact that WiredSafety knew who he was, and that what he had done was a crime. He lived in Canada, and the victim lived in the United States. But it's against the law in both countries. (I warn parents not to do this yourselves. Don't contact the cyberstalker. It almost always escalates the stalking. Instead, contact law-enforcement agencies, groups like WiredSafety or their ISP for help.)

He immediately was contrite. He admitted that he was a teenager and was just fooling around. He thought it was fun to try to scare people, and didn't consider it a serious problem since he had no intention of acting on his threats. He promised never to do it again. Kelley shared this information with the victim, who called the home of the stalker. (Again, I advise against doing this.) His grandmother answered and immediately understood the seriousness of her grandson's actions. The victim and Kelley were both satisfied that the matter would be dealt with appropriately, and didn't think that legal intervention was necessary.