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24 arrested for child solicitation

By SOPHIA VORAVONG
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Mary Baxter of West Lafayette keeps a close eye on her teenage daughters' Internet access: Courtney, 13, can only sign on under mom's account, and 15-year-old Whitney's laptop computer is checked about once a week.

Call her overprotective, but Baxter says such safeguards are necessary as she hears more stories of sexual predators soliciting teens online.

"I know that I am responsible in God's eyes for everything that can happen to them if I don't check," Baxter said. "I think it's scary online. And it's only getting scarier and scarier."

Her concerns are valid. This weekend, detectives in Tippecanoe, Porter and St. Joseph counties arrested 24 men accused of trying to coerce teen girls online for sexual activity, U.S. attorney Joseph Van Bokkelen of Indiana's Northern District announced Tuesday morning.

They actually were "chatting" with police detectives posing as 13-year-old girls in various Internet chat forums and social networking Web sites, Van Bokkelen said during a press conference at the West Lafayette Police Department.

"They are the worst of the worst," he said of the suspects.



(By John Terhune/Journal & Courier)
Members of local police agencies listen Tues Attorney Joseph S. Van Bokkelen announces made over the weekend in a online child soliciting.

Internet predators: What you can do THE NATIONAL ANGLE

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales announced a service campaign this week that will warn teenagers against posting information on the Internet that could put them at risk of attack by child predators.

According to a study by the Department of Justice, seven children using the Internet has been sexually abused and one in three has been exposed to unwanted material. One in 11 has been harassed.

The ad campaign -- sponsored by the Department of Justice in partnership with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Ad Council -- will begin early next year.

TIPS FOR PARENTS
Courtesy of the FBI's "A Parent's Guide to Safe Internet Use"

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Eleven of the men arrested during the 21-day-long federal sting actually traveled to a proposed meeting place, including five who came to Tippecanoe County. The other arrests were based on alleged explicit chatroom conversations.

One suspect is from Lafayette, and another is from Monticello. All are being held without bond.

The men are expected to have detention hearings this week and next to determine whether they should remain in custody pending the outcomes of their cases.

Police in Tippecanoe County made nearly half of the arrests, which Lafayette deputy police chief John Dennis and sheriff's Maj. Tracy Brown attributed to strong inter-agency cooperation.

"Everyone was focused on accomplishing one major task," Dennis said.

The investigation was part of a recently announced national effort called Project Safe Childhood.

Police have seen a rise in Internet-related crimes as technology has advanced, giving suspects more anonymity. Some of those arrested used multiple Internet Protocol, or IP addresses, to evade police, he said.

He said parents and schools are part of the solution. Parents should take steps such as moving personal computers to common rooms and monitoring their children's activity online.

Schools also should educate students on the potential dangers, he said.

Baxter, the West Lafayette parent, said she utilizes the parental control options made available by her Internet provider. She also monitors her daughters' activity on two networking sites, MySpace and Facebook.

"The No. 1 rule you teach kids ... is make leery of strangers," Baxter said.

Her oldest daughter, Whitney Baxter, a sophomore at Harrison High School, said her mom's rules don't bother her -- in fact, the teen has taken her own steps toward online safety.

Whitney, who has an account on Facebook, deleted her MySpace Web site because she had less control over who could view it.

"Anyone could see my profile, and I didn't like that," Whitney said. "They could see anything my friends said about me, any personal information. I didn't like people seeing that."

- Communicate. Talk to your child about sexual victimization and potential online danger.
- Spend time with your children online. Have them tell you about their favorite online destinations.
- Keep the computer in a common room in the house, not in your child's bedroom.
- Use parental controls provided by your service and/or blocking software.
- Monitor online chats.
- Maintain access to your child's online accounts and randomly check his/her e-mail.

TIPS FOR CHILDREN

Also courtesy of the FBI:

- Never arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone you meet online.
- Don't post pictures of yourself on the Internet you do not personally know.
- Keep identifying information, such as name, address, school name or telephone number, private.
- Don't download pictures from an unknown source.
- Ignore messages or bulletin board postings that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent or harassing.

For more Internet safety tips, check out www.fbi.gov click on "Be Crime Smart."

Those arrested in Internet predator sting

This weekend, detectives in Tippecanoe, Porter and Joseph counties arrested 24 men accused of trying to coerce teen girls online to engage in alleged sex. U.S. attorney Joseph Van Bokkelen of Indiana's Southern District announced Tuesday morning. Here is a list of those arrested.

Arrested in Tippecanoe County after traveling to proposed meeting place here:

- Charles D. Fuller, 45, Lafayette
- Jimmie L. Collins, 47, Whiteland
- Stephen Schaffer, 23, Martinsville
- David Lohman, 37, Indianapolis
- Rahul L. Mannara, 33, South Bend

Additional arrests from the Tippecanoe County investigation:

- Michael Hackley, 35, Springfield, Ohio
- Donald L. Cochran, 47, Rushville
- Jeffrey P. Taylor, 37, Logansport
- Thomas Wallace, 35, Anderson
- Mark Ciesolka, 32, Columbus, Ohio
- A sixth suspect that has not been named.

Arrested in Porter County after traveling to a meeting place there:

- Clayton McNeely, 25, Monticello
- David C. Rouhselang, 41, Crown Point
- Justin Reichart, 22, Fort Wayne
- Matthew Hensley, 24, Valparaiso
- James Daniel, 30, Valparaiso

Additional arrests from the Porter County investigation:

- J. Anthony Capozzoli, 26, Greentown
- Travis Springer, 21, Decatur

On Facebook, she set it so only her approved friends have access.

Bob Troyer, assistant principal of West Lafayette Junior High School, said the school first started speaking last year to parents about Internet safety, Instant Messaging and text messaging on cell phones. Just a few years ago, the problem was more one for high school students, he said.

"It's pretty hard in today's society," Troyer said. "Children are very computer literate. They start experimenting and exploring areas that can lead to problems."

He said students cannot access social networking sites because of blocking tools the school uses. Students and parents must sign an Internet access agreement stating that school computers will only be used for research.

Van Bokkelen said the investigation was one of the most intensive efforts the U.S. Attorney's office has undergone. A total of 29 federal, state and local police agencies assisted.

Arrested in St. Joseph County after traveling proposed meeting place there:

- Derek Scott Davey, age unavailable, Berrien Mich.

Additional arrests from the St. Joseph Count investigation:

- James R. McManus, 35, Fort Wayne
- Matthew K. Toosley, 25, Knox
- John A. Payne, 29, Plymouth
- Steven Berry, 46, Rockville
- Brian Gladish, 35, Montgomery

-- *Sophia Voravong/Journal & Courier*

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