

## **Reducing Risk...12 Strategies to Keep Young Performers Safe In Cyberspace**

The recent explosive advancements of technology have brought about some new situations that parents and all those assisting young performers in their career need to be aware of. Pedophilia, website squatting, the selling of headshots and candid photos on eBay, identity theft, extortion and the discussion of child actors (famous and not) on message boards has become common. Professional child performers are by definition in a high-risk situation. The anonymity and global reach of the internet has greatly increased the ability of those with ill intentions to prey on children.

These are very dangerous issues, both for the child as a person and for their long-term career. While your child may not be “famous” right now, as a parent, you must develop an aggressive safety strategy in case they DO find success later. Of course, we can’t hide our children in a closet, nor would we want to. But we can make smart decisions, *weigh the risk vs. the benefit of each situation*, and reduce the risk.

The most important single concept to keep in mind is that the internet is not a small community, and information there can be accessed, transferred, manipulated and preserved forever. Be very careful of the details you provide on the internet, be it on casting sites, or within message boards.

Here are 10 strategies to reduce the risk for your professional child performer no matter where they are in their career:

1. **PREDATOR-PROOF** your world, like you once child-proofed your home. Do a sweep of everything written and on-line...resumes, on-line casting, websites, audition sign-ins, size cards, etc. Delete home addresses (use a P.O. Box or your agent’s address), home phone numbers (use a cell phone for business), social security numbers, child’s personal email address, or hometown identifiers such as the name of a school or church, or the name of the sports team they play. Don’t give a potential predator a clue as to where they might find your child at any given time. Limit information that could make a stranger sound like a friend.

2. **HEADSHOTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY** It has become more common for headshots to be sold on the internet, or displayed on sites without permission. A parent should be aware of the rights their child has to their headshot, and the appropriate actions they can take if someone is violation those rights. Laws vary from state to state, but you can view a primer at [www.bizparentz.com](http://www.bizparentz.com) in the “Keeping Kids’ Safe” section.

Be wary of photographers who seek you out on the internet or at competitions or showcases. Be wary of photographers offering TFP photos, “free” headshots, or photography “workshops”. There is a strong possibility that they are planning to sell the photos in some unsavory places. Legitimate photographers get paid for their work, as should you. Consider asking the photographer to sign a release that details each of your rights to the photos.

Be aware of the existence and use of child erotica photography (as opposed to pornography). Many parents feel that they are “safe” since they do not allow nudity. In reality, many predators prefer more “real” photos that highlight their current fetish. Be wary of tank tops on boys, shirtless boy photos, bare feet, photos near water, hosiery on girls, and poses with the hands above the head or with the crotch in view (even if clothed).

3. **BACKGROUND CHECK** everyone that comes in contact with your child including agents, managers, publicists, photographers and directors. You can do this yourself with the help of the internet. Do not assume that because they can drop a few significant names or because they work for a “family” company that they are safe (at least two men have been arrested in the last year who worked for Disney and Nickelodeon). Be aware that adults in our industry (agents, managers, etc) are not fingerprinted and do not undergo any type of scrutiny. Do a Google search of names and companies. Check IMDb.com for work history. Check the Megan’s law sex offender registry. Ask lots of questions. Check with other parents who have worked with them in the past.

4. **BEWARE OF THOSE THAT ARE “TOO” INTERESTED.** It is very important to realize that most predators in our industry are not kidnappers or situational rapists. They are known as *preferential offenders* which mean that they befriend the family and groom the child over a period of months or years. It’s not “stranger danger” we’re talking about...it’s the people close to us in the business setting. Beware of business professionals who have suspicious behaviors: showering you and your child with flattery, keeping secrets with their young clients, offering to take the child on trips, giving the child gifts, promising rewards such as film roles or award nominations, etc. Separate your child’s business from your personal life.

5. **USE SEARCH ENGINES:** As a routine, a family should use a search engine (Google, Yahoo, etc.) and check for their child’s name to see where they might find their child being discussed or depicted. Often they will appear on legitimate sites related to the work they have done, but we have found parents to be shocked at what comes up on their child! This is a great way to assess your risk on a regular basis. See how much information you can find about your child and your family on the internet.

6. **ON-LINE CASTING SERVICES/IMDb:** For actors in major markets such as LA, NY, and Vancouver, there are just a few industry recognized casting sources (ex. Breakdown Services, LA Casting, etc). While the modeling industry is slightly different, parents should use extreme caution when utilizing other online casting sites such as Exploretalent, and Onemodelplace since they are heavily infiltrated with predators. The risk simply isn’t worth the potential benefit. Although it may feel private, this information, even on legitimate sites can be easily accessed by anyone.

Be aware that online casting has also simplified the process of posting casting notices, with very little checks performed on the validity of the project, or the people involved. When responding to a non-union project, use common sense. In fact, use the internet resources to research the individuals involved in a project, and their prior projects.

7. **WEBSITES:** Even if you don’t intend to put up a website, buy the child’s domain name (ex. www.johnjones.com). This ensures that someone else won’t buy it and “squat” on it for the purpose of extorting money from you later or simply exploiting your child’s famous name to redirect to more profitable websites (such as porn). When you buy the domain name be sure to purchase the “privacy protection” to cover your registration info, or at least use a P.O. Box and a cell phone number to register the name.

Be aware that no website is private. If you post a photo or tidbit of information about your location (such as a booking or audition) be aware that you are increasing the risk.

Investigate those who offer to build “official site” for your child. Seriously consider hiring a professional web designer or building the website yourself, rather than having a fan control the content. Professional web designers know the techniques for protecting on-line images (right click function, watermarks, etc).

8. **FAN MAIL:** There may be legitimate fans of your child’s work, and they should be appreciated. Common sense should prevail in dealing with strangers (also known as fans), including fan mail, and anyone who contacts your child directly. Fan mail should be sorted and responded to discriminately by an adult. Be aware that a good

portion of fan mail comes from prison (look at return addresses!) and should not be answered. Consider refusing to sign autograph cards, and instead send a signed photo. Always personalize autographs to the recipient, since it is more respectful to the true fan, but discourages the sale in secondary markets.

9. LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. Be on alert in situations where child actors gather. These are the same locations that pedophiles gather for good reason—kids are relaxed, having fun, and have their guard down. Consider charity events, red carpet events, and even apartment complexes that cater to child actors as high risk situations. Talent competitions are a buffet for pedophiles and are extremely high risk.

Professional performers must be taught techniques for handling questions and guarding their safety—don't say where you go to school, don't do anything you don't want photographed by pedophiles, etc. Legitimate photographers and wire services should be treated with respect, but be wary of those without press credentials.

10. DRAW A LINE IN THE SAND when submitting for and considering work. Your family needs to discuss in advance, what kinds of roles you will and won't accept so the decision is not made in the heat of the moment. Be aware that your child's performance WILL be screen-captured and preserved forever. Roles that require little clothing, or plotlines regarding pornography, pedophilia and abuse will be treasured by the "bad guys". *Make sure that the risk you are taking is worth the benefit* career-wise. You have the right to say NO, or to compromise by making wardrobe selections, etc.

11. MONITOR YOUR CHILD'S INTERNET ACTIVITY: While there is a lot of information available to parents about monitoring their child's internet use, those concerns are greater for the child actor who may have a public persona. Teen fads such as Xanga and Myspace are not private, although clearly the kids think they are. Predators are VERY present on these sites and discuss it often on their own message boards. Parents should stress to their children that they are visible on those sites if they have identified themselves by their real name. In this one instance, encourage them to lie...create a name, a false hometown, etc. Consider keeping family computers in common places and not in the child's bedroom to reduce the risk of inappropriate internet activity.

12. TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS. Listen to your child. If you feel the least bit uncomfortable, that is reason enough to be cautious and say NO. To quote Dave Dalton, former LAPD detective and president of Dalton Security Company, "If it walks like a duck, and talks like a duck— it's a DUCK! Professional young performers are a "target-rich market" for predators. You have a lot of DUCKS in your world!". No career move is worth your child's safety.

*You can find more information about this subject at [http:// www.Bizparentz.com](http://www.Bizparentz.com)  
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