



## Keeping Kids Safe Online

BY JOEL BANNER BAIRD • FREE PRESS • JUNE 28, 2008

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Networked online, few keystrokes separate strangers. In a matter of seconds, the easy intimacy of acronyms can bring together lonely hearts — or a sexual predator closer to prey.

What's to keep "LOL" (laughing out loud) from progressing to "KPC" (keeping parents clueless)? Or "TDTM" (talk dirty to me) into "LMIRL" (let's meet in real life)?

Police investigators have struggled to piece together the online correspondence that prompted Brooke Bennett, 12, of Braintree to arrange a meeting Wednesday with an apparent stranger.

Among the strategies to prevent such meetings, the most useful ones are decidedly low-tech, says Gary Kessler, who teaches digital forensics at Champlain College.

"You show an interest in kids' lives, and you communicate those interests," he said Friday. "It comes down to what kind of relationship you have with your kids." As outreach coordinator for the Vermont Internet Crimes Task Force, Kessler explores with communities how best to guide virtual encounters.

He speaks from personal experience.

"I've never been an advocate for logging where my kids go or filtering what they see — because ultimately, they'll just leave the house and use another computer," he said. "I keep a computer where we can watch what they're looking at. When they reach a certain age, we can discuss what the risks are.

"You're not monitoring them," he continued. "You're just trying to be their parent. When a kid is ready to drive, we don't just hand them the keys, do we?"

Kessler said young people, often more trusting and impulsive than adults, are vulnerable to quick invitations of intimacy. And they can be cavalier with **personal information**.

"We warn kids to be careful around strangers, but we don't always define what a stranger is," he said. "Anyone you meet online is a stranger."

Anonymity emboldens the timid, said Burlington Police Chief Michael Schirling, whose department coordinates statewide efforts to

solve and prevent Internet crimes against children.

"It's an inherent hazard on the Web, and works both ways," Schirling said. "The youth population enjoys playing at different personas because it's fun or cool. Offenders leverage anonymity and lie about their own identities.

"It's a dangerous combination," he continued. "People say things to each other without having to overcome the fear of getting to know them. The Internet shouldn't be the social surrogate of society."

Experts on missing children say the Internet can be a dangerous place.

"The reality is that the Internet is the predator's new playground. They don't have to lurk in bushes anymore; they can lurk in cyberspace," said Marc Klaas, founder of the Klaaskids Foundation of Sausalito, Calif.

"It enables them to create any kind of a fantasy or fake life they want so they can use their well-honed manipulative skills to get close to the particularly vulnerable," said Klaas, whose 12-year-old daughter, Polly Klaas, was abducted from a slumber party in 1993 and later found slain.

Bob Hoever, associate director of training for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said child abductions related to the Internet are on the rise.

The public's help can be key in solving them.

"When a child disappears, it's like trying to find a needle in a haystack," he said.

"The more eyes and ears we have out there looking, the smaller that haystack becomes. Thanks to public help, 400 children have been safely rescued and returned to their families specifically because of the Amber Alert program and the public's help."

Parents should learn more about online networking — ideally from their children — so they can discuss links between virtual and "live" behavior, Kessler said.

"People have met on the Internet and they've developed good relationships," he said. "They've gotten married, they've made great friends. It happens, but it doesn't happen every time.

"It's not the same as being introduced to strangers by a trusted third party," he added. "And it's not a reason to travel to where they are, certainly not alone."

*The Associated Press contributed to his report. Contact Joel Banner Baird at 660-1843 or [joelbaird@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com](mailto:joelbaird@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com). A more complete and more explicit glossary of online acronyms can be found at [www.NetLingo.com](http://www.NetLingo.com).*

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## Missing girl: Divers conduct search in lake

BY WILSON RING • THE ASSOCIATED PRESS • JUNE 28, 2008

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BROOKFIELD — The search for a missing 12-year-old girl broadened Friday as the **FBI** joined in and police investigators turned to officials at MySpace.com, the online social networking site through which she had been communicating with an unknown person before her disappearance.<BR

A day after her disappearance triggered **Vermont's** first Amber Alert, investigators focused on someone Brooke Bennett might have met online, the head of the Vermont State Police said.<BR

"This case is about a MySpace visitation," Col. James Baker said. "Our focus is on the communications Brooke may have had via that media."

Police are asking for help from the public. Anyone who was in Randolph on Wednesday morning is asked to call the state police, even if they don't think they saw anything significant, Baker said. They're especially interested in talking with people in a convenience store at the same time Brooke and her uncle were there.

Brooke, of Braintree, vanished Wednesday after being dropped off at about 9 a.m. at the Cumberland Farms store in Randolph, where she was supposedly going to meet a friend and then go to a hospital to visit a relative of the friend.

She was seen in Randolph as late as 9:45 and possibly later, Baker said.

Police believe Brooke was not planning to meet a friend and that she might have been going to meet someone she'd been communicating with online. Video from an interior surveillance camera at the store — released Friday — showed the girl and her uncle walk into the store and then leave, each going in separate directions, with Brooke walking away by herself.

She was seen about 45 minutes later inside the Randolph Village Laundromat, police said.

Baker wouldn't say whether she was alone at that point, nor would he say whether police suspect foul play.

"We don't know if Brooke left with someone voluntarily. We don't know if Brooke is in another state camping and has no idea that this whole thing is going on," Baker said. "We're not ready to say that she was kidnapped, but we made the decision yesterday to put that Amber Alert out, take a very liberal interpretation of what kidnap meant."

Brooke was reported missing about 9 p.m. Wednesday, and an Amber Alert was issued Thursday.

Friday, state police dive teams searched Sunset Lake, near where items belonging to Brooke were found Thursday by a family member. Baker said the divers found nothing.

Meanwhile, investigators from the Vermont State Police, FBI and other agencies were trying to track Brooke's movements after she was dropped off by her uncle and cousin.

During the day Friday, the FBI brought in agents from **New England** and experts in behavioral science from Quantico, Va.

A major focus of the investigation was centered on her online activities.

"As we all know, warnings have gone out countless times, in this world that we live in today, there are folks that visit places, social networking spaces such as MySpace, whose intentions are not good. And they come from far away," Baker said.

Baker said the Amber Alert wasn't issued sooner because investigators had to determine whether her disappearance met the criteria for one. Officials didn't decide to issue the alert until they knew the MySpace activity could be related to it, he said.

Baker said MySpace officials — who posted the Amber Alert on their Web site — were being helpful.

"MySpace takes the safety of our users very seriously," its chief security officer, Hemanshu Nigam, said in a statement released by the company. "We are assisting the Vermont State Police Department and cannot comment any further as it is an ongoing investigation."

Associated Press writer John Curran in Montpelier contributed to this report.