

How safe is your daughter? Paedophiles using the web to trap girls are often middle-class and married. And the police are struggling to cope...

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Somewhere out there, as you read this, a man sits hunched over his computer, his brow furrowed in concentration as he taps away at his keyboard.

But he's not booking cinema tickets or tracing his family tree or doing any of the things that have made the internet such a valuable tool of modern life.

No, the sickening truth is that he's pretending to be a 13-year-old girl and he's in one of those internet chatrooms so beloved of our teenagers.



Young prey: Young girls using internet chatlines (like this 11-year-old girl posing as model) are vulnerable to the evil minds of some men

Using modern text-speak to pass muster as a teenager, he taps out an innocent-sounding question, the sort one teenage girl might ask another.

'Hve u gt a boyfriend - lol?' 'No,' replies the very real 12-year-old, giggling as she types.

Back comes the reply: 'Wd u like one?' The trap is about to be set.

The man, of course, is a paedophile; one of the most feared and loathed figures in today's society. But the girl, sitting at her computer in the comfort and supposed safety of her own bedroom. . . well, she could be my daughter, your daughter or anyone's daughter.

As a father, I know it's important not to overstate the danger our girls are in but, as a former policeman and professional child protection consultant, I also know the paedophile threat is out there. It's very real, it's very nasty indeed and the connection between those internet chats and images of paedophilia are all too common.

I've spent the past 18 months shadowing the officers of Scotland Yard's Paedophile Unit and, despite being a former detective with more than 12 years of experience in child protection, I've been horrified by what I've seen.

It's not just the appalling nature of the photographic images that so alarms me; it's the number of them. Barely a decade ago, we thought it was bad enough that there were a few thousand of these images being passed around paedophile rings. Now there are literally millions.

A vulnerable teenager is just a mouse click away

It's become not just a worldwide problem, but a worldwide business, too, with organised crime gangs increasingly keen to muscle in on the lucrative trade for this truly disgusting material.

What you have to remember is that for each and every one of those images, a child has been coerced, assaulted and badly hurt. Many will have been raped and, in a few tragic cases, the victim may even have been killed. That's the reality of modern paedophilia.

Despite the horrific nature of these crimes, the problem seems to get worse every year.

As Detective Chief Inspector Nick Stevens, who heads the unit, puts it, he could have three times the staff he has and still be struggling to cope with the demand for their services.

The big question, of course, is who is looking at these appalling images and then going on, in far too many cases, to plan and commit their own assaults on children?

What my time at the Paedophile Unit has revealed is that the days when a lazy stereotype of a paedophile - a male, middle-aged loner, often still living with his parents - are long over.

Yes, child protection officers do still come across the sad and dangerous individuals who could be described in that way, but increasingly they are arresting a new breed of paedophile.

Often married and with children themselves, they can be well-educated and highly successful in their field.

Passing them in the street - and it could easily be *your* street - you wouldn't give them a second glance. But despite often having no criminal record, they pose every bit as serious a threat to our children as the more readily identifiable 'dirty old men' of the past.

'In the past couple of years we've arrested magistrates, lawyers, company directors, police officers, people in the media,' DCI Stevens tells me. Chillingly, it seems paedophiles and offenders really do now come from all walks of life.



Fad: More and more teenage girls are using webcams to meet new people over the internet

Take Andrew Lintern, for instance, one of the men I saw being arrested, who had travelled to London from Hertfordshire in the hope of having sex with a 13-year-old girl.

He was 55, married, highly qualified as a scientist working in IT, professional and, it later emerged, an Oxford graduate.

And yet when officers from the Paedophile Unit raided his home, they found nearly 20,000 indecent images, including video-clips of a 17-month-old baby being assaulted.

Lintern later confessed that the man assaulting the baby in the video-clips was, in fact, himself - an admission that no doubt contributed to him being ordered to be detained indefinitely when he came before Southwark Crown Court earlier this year.

What's brought about this sea change in both the number of paedophiles and the backgrounds they come from, of course, is the internet.

Twenty years ago, a predatory paedophile would have had to loiter around parks, funfairs and swimming pools to gain access to children, where his suspicious behaviour - in full public view - would often have raised the alarm before he could cause any real harm.

But computers and the internet have brought an end to all that. Now a paedophile can be chatting to a vulnerable young teenager - even watching her on a webcam - after just a few clicks of his mouse.

The internet has become famous for bringing people together - relatives, old school friends, prospective husbands and wives - but it also has a dark side, and it doesn't come much darker than bringing a paedophile and his victim together.

That's what happened when Andrew Lintern logged onto an internet chatroom pretending to be a nine-year-old girl and began a conversation with 'Jessie', whom he believed was a 13-year old-girl.

Only, just as the nine-year-old girl wasn't who she said she was, nor was Jessie. In fact, she was John Taylor, a middle-aged detective and a Covert Internet Investigator (CII) with the Paedophile Unit.

'Thousands in the UK have looked at child pornography'

To catch the new breed of paedophile, you see, has required a new form of policing and Scotland Yard's Paedophile Unit has led the world with its pro-active approach.

Since 2005, it's been using officers posing as young girls in internet chatrooms and on social networking sites to draw these paedophiles out into the open.

The idea is not to entrap them (which would be against the law), but simply to communicate with them long enough for them to break the law, either by engaging in sexual grooming, sending indecent images to a minor or by encouraging them to commit an indecent act.

Often, it is the investigation which follows the suspect's arrest on one of these charges that unearths evidence of even more serious crimes.

Such is the burden of proof that Paedophile Unit investigators are able to assemble that, more often than not, the defendants plead guilty.

Having worked alongside them for so many months, I am hugely impressed with their professional commitment and their determination to secure a conviction on the most serious charge they can.

After the excitement of a successful arrest, this, they say, is where the real work begins.

As one of the detectives told me: 'You've got to get their mobile phones examined, their computers examined, their cameras examined and look at every single image. Multiply that by the number of prisoners and it's a phenomenal amount of work.'

It's a meticulous and timeconsuming approach, but it works.

Take Dean Hardy, a Kent businessman who, following a tip off from Europol, the European law enforcement agency, had been arrested for downloading child pornography from the internet.

Convinced but, as yet, unable to prove Hardy had also been assaulting children, his home was searched and a camera memory stick found which revealed pictures of an adult male's hand abusing a young Asian girl.

Proving the hand in the picture was Hardy's required something that had never been done before - a side-by-side photographic comparison and enough points of proven similarity to convince the Crown Prosecution Service, in the first instance, to take the higher charge of sexual assault to court and, in due course, for a jury to find him guilty.

In the end, however, the level of evidence so painstakingly assembled by the Paedophile Unit detectives was so great that Hardy pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to six years in prison earlier this year.

So how many paedophiles are there out there, trawling the net for underage girls? The truth is that not even Nick Stevens, head of the Paedophile Unit, knows. 'I believe there are thousands of people in the UK who have looked at child pornography.' What he doesn't know is what proportion go on and try to make contact online with a child and then meet them.

Children need to know the dark side of the internet

All I can add, having watched the Paedophile Unit at work and worked myself in the same field, is that we under-estimate the scale of the problem at our peril. The internet has opened a door, and I believe that many men have already stepped through it and more will follow.

The statistic that keeps coming back to me is that of 300 men arrested by the Paedophile Unit since 2005, most had no previous convictions.

To put it another way, if John Taylor hadn't pretended to be 'Jessie', Andrew Lintern, a man we now know had been abusing children for a decade, would still be out there.

What can be done about this growing evil? Well, a number of things. Scotland Yard's Paedophile Unit has led the world with its approach to catching paedophiles, and I'd like to see other enforcement agencies around the world following their example. But I'd also like police forces everywhere to remember that this is a crime with a victim as well as a perpetrator.

If we're clever and fortunate, we can send that perpetrator to prison for a very long time, but there's a danger that we forget the often terrifying ordeal his victims may have experienced. They need our help and, at the moment, they're not always getting it.

I'd also like to see internet service providers and those hosting chatrooms and social networking sites to be held responsible for the content they carry. Some sites need to be closed down entirely; others need to be far more effectively moderated.

But most of the responsibility for safe-guarding the future of our children is, inevitably, going to fall on parents. CEOP, the Child Exploitation and On-line Protection centre provides excellent advice to concerned parents, but basic protection measures are not difficult.

We need to start talking to our children about the internet when they are still at an early age - even as young as five or six - explaining in simple language that, while it's a wonderfully useful resource, it also has a dark side. We need to tell them that people tell lies out there and pretend to be things they are not.

As they grow older, we have to make an effort to try to understand how our children's use of the net is changing. What sites are they visiting, what are they doing when they are there and who are they talking to?

If your children are using social networking sites, make sure they are above the site's minimum age. If they are posting pictures on-line, explain to them the need to be appropriate. The number of 12 to 14-year-old girls posting pictures of themselves online in semi-erotic poses is simply horrifying.

Children's computers need to be in a central area where parents can keep half an eye on the screen, not tucked away in their bedrooms. And if you see them using a chatroom or live messaging, ask them to identify everyone who's on-line with them.

If they can't, tell them to log-off immediately and remind them of the golden rule - that they should never, ever arrange to meet strangers they have met on-line.

And that's because the nice-sounding 13-year-old girl they've just met in a chatroom, who's so keen to share pictures of her new pony or sweet litter of puppies and has just suggested meeting up for a coffee, might just be a 55-year-old man with something very different in mind.

Paedophiles pose a real threat to our children; there's no doubt about that. And while the men and women of Scotland Yard's Paedophile Unit are doing a wonderful job of catching them and sending them to prison, it's up to parents to provide the first line of defence.

So, when your children next go on-line, ask yourself one question: do you really know who they're talking to?