

Child safety is a topic that generates much discussion and is at the forefront of the minds of parents, family members, educators, and care givers. Our society benefits from the overwhelming number of people who care about and advocate for child safety. Child safety has meant many different things over our human history. One modern aspect of child safety has everything to do with technology and the interconnectedness of our world.

Child safety efforts are constantly evolving and changing as the environment surrounding children evolves and changes too. The last part of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century saw states and the federal government pass laws regulating child labor and working conditions. Beginning in the 1960s, child safety seats for passenger vehicles came into existence with their functional protection and mandated usage increasing incrementally. From the 1960s through the 1990s, child safety efforts focused on curfews as a safety tool, including a nightly PSA reminder that it was 10 o'clock followed by the question, "Do you know where your children are?" Around the 1980s, high-profile child abduction cases, like the Jacob Wetterling abduction, spawned the "Stranger Danger" campaign aimed at protecting children from stranger abductions. The development of the internet and later cellular networks marked a turning point in child safety. As our homes and our personal devices became more connected to the wider world, the ability for criminals to reach children increased dramatically.

While stranger abductions and acts of violence continue to capture headlines and spark fear, the most likely route to danger for our children is through the cell phones, tablets, and online video games systems they use daily. A criminal with an internet connection can contact dozens of children online each day by visiting one of the many places children gather online. The unfortunate reality of our modern world is, short of never allowing a child access to the online world, there is no way to insulate a child from ever being in the same virtual space as a criminal. During these dozens of interactions with potential victims, the criminals work to befriend children they see as vulnerable, grooming them to lower their defenses. These criminals begin with benign conversations, seeking to develop comfortable connections with their victims. However, in each case, there will always come a point where the criminal asks the child to do something uncomfortable. The request might be to share private images, meet in person somewhere, or run away together. We need to prepare our children for this moment. A child who knows this moment might come and knows that this moment represents danger is more likely to refuse to step into that dangerous next level with the criminal. During age-appropriate conversations with children about the existence of online criminals, children should be encouraged to talk to a trusted adult the moment anyone asks them to do something that makes them uncomfortable.

The tragic reality is that for a select few children, these tactics work. I see their faces at least weekly on missing child bulletins that come from all corners of Minnesota. Heart wrenching tales from survivors of child trafficking present similar stories of grooming, substance addiction, sex trafficking, and abuse that no child should have to endure.

Conversations with children about the realities of our world are uncomfortable, full of heavy sighs, and punctuated by eye rolls. These are a small price to pay to ensure the children in your life are protected against predators. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.