

NEWS

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Poll: Florida parents feel the world is getting riskier for their children

Educational initiative aims to help parents and guardians keep children safer from predators –in neighborhoods, and on the Internet

TALLAHASSEE — A new poll finds Florida parents perceive their children to be at greater risk than ever before – a problem a new educational initiative hopes to remedy by arming parents and guardians with potent new tools to help keep children safer as they go out in the community, rove the World Wide Web, or participate in after school programs and summer camps.

The *Safe Steps* initiative was launched today by the Office of the Attorney General of Florida, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), the Florida School Boards Association, Macy's, and Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd at a news conference at the Florida Press Center. The *Safe Steps* partners released the results of a sobering new statewide poll of parents and unveiled a new Web site, www.safestepsfla.net offering parents tips and advice for teens, kids, childcare facilities, after school programs and the Internet.

Ironically, the poll reveals many parents perceive their children to be at greater risk in general, but may not be aware of specific risks. Forty-five percent of those surveyed in a statewide poll conducted by **Mason-Dixon Polling and Research** (between June 19-22) said they believe children in their communities today are at a greater risk of suffering harm at the hands of an offender or predator than they were five years ago.

“Clearly, parents need and want help to keep the most important responsibility of their lives – their children – free from harm,” said Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist, who helped launch the new initiative Wednesday in Tallahassee. “The environment is changing rapidly and parents need help understanding the risks. The critical factor is equipping parents with solid information and tips based on facts and not simply the perception of risks,” he said.

“That’s where **Safe Steps** comes in. This is an outstanding example of how government, private safety experts and concerned corporate citizens can come together to fill a pressing need. Through the Web site, public service announcements, the informational booklet published last year and ongoing educational outreach, we can arm parents with information about real threats and sound strategies to keep their children safer.”

Consumer advocate Michelle Vasilinda called the poll results revealing in a variety of ways that parents and guardians should find helpful. “Above all, the poll suggests parents are not always clearly identifying some of the risks,” Vasilinda said. “Nor are they taking the needed steps to help protect their children.”

For example, she said, the sense of risk undoubtedly is motivating many Florida parents and guardians to closely monitor their children’s whereabouts during the day and to attempt to monitor their Internet activities. The Mason-Dixon poll found:

- A majority of parents say they monitor the whereabouts of their children every hour of the day during the summer (68 percent) as well as during the school year (71 percent)
- Some 84 percent said they allow their children to use a home computer with Internet access and 93 percent of those parents say they are aware of “when and how” their children are using the Internet
- 80 percent of parents with children who use home computers say they read their children’s blogs, journals or “myspace.com” entries and 67 percent report they monitor their children’s instant messaging and chatroom conversations

But, said Vasilinda, the poll also found that while many parents and guardians are aware of potential Internet risks they may not be as aware of the practical steps they may, or should, be taking to help protect their children. The poll found:

- 49 percent of parents (whose children use the Internet) allow their children to surf the Internet when they’re not home
- 14 percent of parents (whose children have access to a home computer) report the computer is in the child’s bedroom, the one place experts warn most *against* placing a computer
- 47 percent of parents incorrectly believe a child is more likely to be abducted by someone the child does not know, when in fact experts continue to warn that children are most likely to be abducted by persons already familiar to them
- 53 percent of parents said they are familiar with the chatroom codes their children might encounter, yet only 15 percent of those knew that the commonly used chat room code “A/S/L” stands for “Age/Sex/Location”

Eighty-eight percent of Florida parents and guardians believe their children are likely to tell them of a sexual solicitation, but according to a 2000 NCMEC study only around 25 percent of solicitations are reported to parents or guardians. Of the eight percent of parents in the *Safe Steps* /Mason-Dixon poll whose children reported having had a threatening or disturbing experience on the Internet, 51 percent involved exposure to obscene emails or Web sites, 35 percent involved contact with someone they did not know and two percent involved requests to meet someone they did not know.

“The key to minimizing risk while on the Internet is education and supervision. Parents, guardians, kids and teens need to know what the consequences may be of posting personal information on the Internet or carrying-on a conversation via instant messaging or chatrooms

with a person they do not know,” said Esther Cookson, Director of NetSmartz Workshop, NCMEC.

“While something may seem perfectly harmless to a kid or teen, their naiveté may open the door and make them vulnerable to online predators. Just as parents warn children of the possible dangers outside the home, they must be equally vigilant when allowing them to have access to the Internet.”

Nearly one-third of parents polled report their children maintain an online journal, blog or personal page on a site such as “myspace.com.” Florida parents whose children use the Internet report 66 percent of the children post photos, videos or other personal identifying information including their name, school and town on the site.

“Certainly, there is a heightened awareness among parents of the threats posed to their children while online. However this poll clearly shows that there are other circumstances that can potentially put their safety at risk,” stated N.K. “Trip” Tripathy, Macy’s Florida President and COO. “As members of the community, it is our responsibility to help inform parents of every possible danger when it comes to the protection of children.”

Almost 30 percent of parents in the poll reported they were “not sure” whether the summer camps attended by their children performed background checks of employees.

“Be aware of all the safeguards organizations have as a policy,” said Wayne Blanton, Executive Director, Florida School Boards Association. “Public schools in Florida are a safe place for our children and through the *Safe Steps* initiative, we aim to make children safer everywhere.”

“Raising children can be quite challenging in this day and age, and it’s critical that we do all we can to keep our children safe,” said Penny Phillips, Community Relations Manager, Royal Caribbean Cruise Ltd. “Like my colleague with Macy’s, all of us with Royal Caribbean International & Celebrity Cruises are proud to be part of the solution for parents in Florida and to be helping them cut through the glut of information out there so they may figure out what steps are truly the most effective when it comes to protecting their young.”

Macy’s – Macy’s Florida, with corporate headquarters in Miami, operates 61 stores in the state of Florida including six furniture galleries. Macy’s has a rich history of supporting the communities it serves, including education initiatives, American Heart Association’s *Go Red for Women* movement, United Way, America’s Second Harvest and others. The company has sponsored the Florida Department of Education/Macy’s Teacher of the Year program for 18 consecutive years and has donated nearly two million dollars to teachers and their schools throughout Florida. Macy’s and Federated Department Stores’ Partners in Time employee volunteers contributed community service time valued at more than \$2 million last year and with 700 projects and 30,000 hours directly benefiting children, education and school partnerships. (www.macys.com)

Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd. is a global cruise vacation company that operates Royal Caribbean International and Celebrity Cruises, with a combined total of 29 ships in service and

five under construction. The company also offers unique land-tour vacations in Alaska, Canada and Europe through its cruise-tour division. Royal Caribbean invests in community organizations and initiatives to enhance the quality of life in communities all over the world. Additional information can be found on (www.royalcaribbean.com, www.celebritycruises.com or www.rclinvestor.com).

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