

Pokémon Go and Social Networking: Can We Do More to Protect Our Children?

By [Robert Hugh Farley, M.S.](#)

According to research from the *Family Online Safety Institute* located in Washington D.C., parents are more concerned about their children's use of social media services, such as *Facebook*, *Snapchat* and *Instagram*, than any other online activity. The [2014 research](#) further states, "While many parents monitor their children's online activity and are confident in their ability to do so, the degree to which parents actively oversee their children's online activities and their confidence in their ability to do so decreases the older their child is."



Law enforcement has frequently seen examples where a young person has been placed at risk because children and teenagers make online mistakes. Sometimes they have been lured by a child molester or they have innocently pushed boundaries too far, thereby risking their own personal safety.

For example, *Pokémon Go* is a free, wildly popular, location-based, social-reality game App that was released to the public in July 2016. The players use their smart phone device's GPS technology capability and clock to locate, fight, and capture animated virtual creatures, called Pokémon.

A "PokéStop" is described as a location in the "real world," such as a building or a park, where players can collect items to help them in the *Pokémon Go* virtual game world. Unfortunately, one of these PokéStops was recently reported by the media to be located at the entrance to a southern California rehabilitation center that housed, among other clients, 10 sex offenders.

Additionally, this App, which allows users to interact virtually with Pokémon characters nearby in the real world, also has a "Lure Feature" that players can use to attract both Pokémon and other users to their location for 30 minutes. Using the geolocation feature, these users are able to know where, when and how many people are going to be in the particular location. Not only does this feature offer a new playground for child molesters to potentially have one-on-one contact with young people, but some players have also reported being [robbed](#) of their devices and valuables when reaching the appointed "lure" location.

As a result of these and other reports, and to reduce the likelihood of sexual exploitation to the children in New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced with much fanfare on August 1, 2016 that a new Department of Corrections state regulation is in place. The enacted regulation states that as a condition of their sentence, registered sex offenders on parole are no longer be able to sign up for *Pokémon Go* and other Internet-enabled games. Unfortunately, this regulation only applies to the approximately 3,000 known New York sex offenders who are currently on parole. One can only imagine how many registered sex offenders across the United States, or those who have never been convicted or even arrested, are now happily utilizing this virtual game App to contact and then lure young people to meet.

Can the government do more to protect children and teenagers from child sexual exploitation? If the government enacts such regulations and laws, should parents and caring adults rely on government regulations to monitor their children's online and other technology facilitated activities?

These questions are being contemplated by parents and government in the 28-member European Union (EU). A proposed new EU policy requires anyone under 16 years of age to obtain parental consent before using any social networking services, unless a regional national government lowers the age limit to 13 years of age. This means that EU teenagers under 16 will be required to seek permission from parents whenever signing up for a social media account, downloading an app or in some cases even using search engines.

Sadly, even prior to the EU parental consent regulation taking effect, there will likely be YouTube or other online videos describing a variety of methods for young people to circumvent the age rule. Additionally, the proposed EU regulation cannot contemplate the ever-changing technology that is rapidly evolving. Who would have predicted the phenomenon of *Pokémon Go* a year ago?

Will we witness some parents in the United States demanding their own government officials implement similar "parental consent" rules for social networking or virtual gaming? Will a government regulation requiring "parental consent" stop those under 16 years of age from using social media? Probably not! History has shown that regulations do not automatically protect children. For example, even though the U.S. government has regulated the sale of tobacco to those under 18 years of age since 1992, many young people still smoke cigarettes.

Adults cannot be complacent. A frank discussion with children and teenagers on boundaries and limits when using technology, social media, virtual games and Apps is essential. Parental controls on device Apps that utilize a GPS tracking feature is an absolute requirement. One should never rely solely on government regulations or laws to protect young people. Parents, teachers and all of us who are charged with protecting children must also continue our efforts to stay abreast of the many dangers connected with the present and future electronic communication devices currently used by young people.

A report regarding suspected crimes of child sexual exploitation or the technology facilitated solicitation of children can always be made, 24 hours—7 days a week, to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)—Cyber Tipline at www.cybertipline.com or 1-800-843-5678.