

When it comes to smartphone games, kids aren't the only ones who want to "catch 'em all."

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Technology is improving the world at a rapid pace, but even the most helpful technology can become a problem in the wrong hands. For example, the evolution of the Internet has made it easier to stay in touch through social media and research school projects, while smartphones have made it easy to capture life's special moments with a candid photo. However, this same technology may also be making children more vulnerable.

As an organization committed to securing justice and healing for the child victims of sexual abuse, the Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) of Texas are encouraging parents and guardians to pay closer attention to the digital media that children are consuming.

Not that long ago, the greatest online threat facing children was the overtures they might encounter in an online chat room, so many parents restricted access to them and even took the wise step of restricting computer use to highly visible areas in the home like the living room. However, smartphones have given young people more unrestricted online access and created new avenues for predators to find them.

According to a recent study, one in 25 youth received an online sexual solicitation where the solicitor tried to make offline, in-person contact. Considering that more than half of all American children between the ages of 8-12 have a cellphone, the odds of inappropriate contact are increasing.

The latest smartphone craze is even greater cause for concern. Pokémon Go is an "augmented reality" game created to take advantage of a smart phone's camera, geo-location abilities and easy interface. While enthusiasts praise the game for getting kids off the couch and walking outdoors, there are some troubling aspects of the game that parents should consider before turning their kids loose to "catch them all."

First, the game can cause a lack of situational awareness, leading players to walk into traffic, wander out of their neighborhood or even fall off a cliff as two young men did in California.

Second, the game includes "lure modules" which can be bought to attract the digital characters and the players pursuing them to a particular area. Family oriented businesses like ice cream parlors are employing this tactic to draw customers, but so are criminals who have placed those lures in low-traffic areas then robbed and assaulted players drawn to their "bait."

Third, the allure of "catching them all" can cause players to disregard social norms like respect for property, with reports of players caught lurking near police stations and, just this week, one homeowner opened fire on players who were obviously trespassing on his property.

If a child predator were to create optimal opportunities to exploit children, it would likely involve all the behaviors listed above. With that in mind, we are encouraging parents to review

the accompanying safety tips and share them with their children to guide their behavior when playing Pokémon Go and other augmented reality games.

At the end of the day, the game is creating fun for kids and their families all over the world, but parents and guardians need to be aware of the potential opportunities this gives predators to exploit children. Because the threats on the path to digital exploitation in any form are real, a growing number of CACs across Texas are working with their partners in law enforcement to incorporate cyber-crime detectives into their efforts. We also work closely with the FBI's Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force to investigate online crimes against children.

Our goal is to rally Texas communities in defense of children, working together to identify victims, apprehend predators and pursue justice. The key is for all involved to be aware of the new realities of the online world and stay alert and engaged.

So be aware, set up some family rules and be sure to seek help if you or someone you know has been inappropriately approached or harmed by a stranger. That way, we can enjoy the benefits of this impressive technology with none of the downside.

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ABOUT THE CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTERS OF TEXAS

Founded in 1994 with a membership of 13 local centers, the CACTX membership roster today includes 69 established and developing centers in large urban cities as well as in small rural communities. CACTX creates a statewide platform for public-private partnerships within communities, fueling the success of the CAC approach by uniting advocates and giving local centers a statewide voice. From their headquarters in Austin, the CACTX team coordinates services among the following groups: local centers, Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs), statewide government agencies, stakeholders, community volunteers, and child welfare advocates. Working together, they positively affect policy and funding for the CAC movement and partner service organizations. CACTX membership reflects the vast diversity of Texas, all with their own unique approaches to fulfilling our shared mission of protecting and providing for children. For more information about CACTX please visit: <http://www.cactx.org/>

ABOUT THE CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER OF TOM GREEN COUNTY, INC.

The CAC is non-profit umbrella organization that offers hope and healing for abused and neglected children as well as, prevention services for children and families through four main programs: Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Hope House, Family Enrichment Services and the Child Fatality Review Team. Each program provides a continuum of services that focus on intervention and prevention of child abuse; the enhancement of family relationships; parent education and guidance; and raising awareness to foster a community of care for the best interests of all children in the Concho Valley.

For more information about the Children's Advocacy Center, visit cactomgreen.org or contact Leann Hubert Forbes (325) 653-4673.

