



Protecting Children in the Modern World

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Technological advances have brought great benefits across Texas, but this progress comes with risks. Technology can also be exploited by unscrupulous or criminal operators, and make our society less safe.

This is particularly true in the Internet age. In the vast spaces of rural Texas or in the heart of our big cities, anyone who logs onto the Internet is at risk of encountering a sexual predator, a cyber bully, an identity thief or other bad actors.

Online danger is always just one mouse click away. It can come from anywhere across the world or close to home. Children are particularly vulnerable. Their first line of defense is their family, but government has a role as well.

Crime fighters at all levels must have more tools and funding to protect children and apprehend cyber criminals. I have made this a priority in the U.S. Senate. We've made some progress recently, but still have a long path ahead of us.

Last month, the U.S. Senate approved two measures to strengthen the anti-predator effort. One would allow parents and online social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, to check whether a particular email address is registered to a sex offender. Another would expand education for children regarding online behavior, help develop new Internet technologies to shield children from undesirable content, and initiate a national public awareness campaign.

Related legislation I strongly supported is the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act. This bill, enacted in 2006, memorializes a six-year old boy who was kidnapped from a Florida mall and murdered in 1981. Adam's parents have dedicated their lives to protecting children and helping victims of crime. His father, John, hosts the America's Most Wanted television program.

The Adam Walsh Act created a national registration system for sex offenders and offenders against children. It also increased punishment for violent crimes against children. Unfortunately, Congress has not yet provided significant funding for this effort.

While resources are delayed in Washington, law enforcement agencies are deprived of vital tools. Today the Walsh family and child advocacy organizations continue to plead with

the Congressional leadership to fully fund this legislation.

Texas has been at the forefront in modern efforts to protect children. The PROTECT Act of 2003, which created a national Amber alert system, was inspired by the 1996 kidnap and murder of Amber Hagerman, 9, from her home in Arlington. After her death, Dallas-Fort Worth broadcast media created a prototype message that can be disseminated when authorities suspect a child has been abducted. The system is now in use nationwide. The Amber alert is an example that technology not only presents new threats, but can be used for innovative safeguards.

I believe there is only one way to deal with those who prey on children. These criminals must be caught quickly, punished severely and watched going forward. As Texas Attorney General, I created a specialized unit to coordinate and direct efforts to fight Internet crimes such as fraud, child pornography and privacy incursions.

Local, state and federal government must be vigilant as technology makes some crimes easier. In protecting children, however, there is no substitute for loving, caring and alert family members.

School has ended for the year. It's a good time for parents, guardians, brothers and sisters and grandparents to raise the alert level, and update their knowledge about Internet safety. The Internet, which can be a useful educational tool, has improved our lives in many ways and left us more exposed in others. Through vigilance, awareness, skepticism and prevention, we can help protect ourselves and our loved ones from high-tech crime.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column.