

Project Safe Childhood Video

President Bush: Earlier this year the Department of Justice, lead by Al Gonzales, launched the Project Safe Childhood to help federal, state, and local enforcement officials investigate and prosecute crimes against children that are facilitated by the internet and other electronic communications.

Alberto Gonzales: The most basic and most important role of any civilized society is to protect its children. It is a challenge that never ends. After all, there are so many dangers that we must protect our kids from; injury and illness, drugs and gangs. The list is frightening and it is long. One threat haunts us more than all the others—the threat of sexual predators. Their crimes against children are irreversible. Their pain lasts a lifetime because it steals the gift of innocence. At times, it seems as if we cannot stay ahead of the threats against our kids. And there is a cruel irony in the fact that society’s technological advancements have provided those who seek to hurt our children with new opportunities. Every day, children are sexually solicited online. Every day, thousands of individuals obtain, distribute, and produce child pornography over the internet.

Regina Schofield: When the Attorney General launched Project Safe Childhood, he had two things in mind. The first thing was to make sure that we can teach our children and our parents about how to protect them and keep them safe from online sexual exploitation. The second thing, is to make sure that we’re supporting law enforcement, prosecutors, individuals that are on the other side of the criminal justice system to make sure these predators are brought to justice, that there are investigations done for cybercrimes, and that we use the entire force of the criminal justice system to protect our children.

Brendan Sheehan: You get these cases, and they say “It’s just a picture,” “It’s just an image” and you have to educate judges, you have to educate the public that it’s not just a picture, but it’s a kid being abused and every time that image is portrayed and every time that image is published, it’s a continuing abuse of that child.

Michelle Collins: There is a misconception as to what child pornography is. These are not just pictures; these are not baby in the bath tub types of photos. These images actually represent the graphic sexual assault of children. In just the last eight years of reviewing the child pornography for the cyber tip line and the CVIP program, we’ve seen the age of the child victims dramatically drop. At this point, 6 percent of the children that we know are identified; are actually infants. And a fully 58 percent otherwise, are children who are still prepubescent.

Arnold Bell: We’re seeing escalating levels of violence; we’re seeing more egregious forms of abuse. It’s almost like it takes more to get people excited than it did a year ago.

Michelle Collins: Individuals who sexually exploit children are very often in positions of trust in that child’s life.

Arnold Bell: We've arrested, unfortunately, lots of cops, we've arrested lots of teachers, lots clergy, boy scouts. There is no profile, per se, for persons who do this type of work. Nothing I've seen in 20 years of law enforcement compares to the things I've seen since I've been in this chair. An example is a little baby, probably about 8-9 months old, being penetrated by an adult male, in the video with sound, and the male's narrating what he's doing to this child and talking about how he likes the feel of the child squirming in his hands, and he likes how the child screams in pain and that sort of stuff. That is unimaginable horror for the kid, unimaginable that anybody in their mind would ever think to do like that.

Brendan Sheehan: This just isn't a picture. It's a crime scene with a child being abused. Even in some of these images you can see them crying; tears in their eyes as they're being abused.

Flint Waters: You're seeing pretty harsh stuff. You see some very hard material. We tracked an individual that was trafficking in child sexual abuse images. And we saw very a high volume. I ended up reaching out to San Diego, and working with them at getting the information so that they would work this case. They ended up arresting an individual who was working as a respiratory therapist in Children's Hospital there. When they started investigating, they found this guy had been molesting one, two, three kids a week; he'd been there for 10 years. He was molesting kids that were coming out of surgery, that were there for hospice care, children that couldn't ask for help. And there were a lot of kids involved. When they asked him about it, he was looking out the window at the weather. And it was snowing where he was. They asked him how many kids he'd molested and he said "How many snowflakes are there?"

Flint Waters: The ICAC task forces are a group of state and local law enforcement agencies that are brought together, supervised, and funded by DOJ, Office of Justice Programs, to do investigations of child exploitation on the internet. The ICAC data network is a series of servers, located in Wyoming, that are accessible to investigators throughout the United States. One of the big advantages that comes from being able to do this is we can actually make it possible for investigators to not have to look at these videos over and over and over again. The images that we see that depict 2-year olds being violently raped are not only destructive to everyone involved, but they can tear down these officers that are working these investigations.

Arnold Bell: There are about 37 Innocent Images task forces across the country. In almost all of those task forces there are state and local representation on those task forces, so if you overlay the ICAC map of where the task forces are with the FBI map, the country is pretty well blanketed in terms of online presence, covert presence to work in these matters. Obviously, we do our enticement cases every day, there are agents online in this country every single day that are posing as kids and in a matter of minutes, you have four or five guys asking you "How old are you?" "Are you a virgin?" "What's your bra size?" "Do you have pubic hair?" You'll see very aggressive solicitation or you'll see a grooming process that could last over several weeks, where the person slowly introduces sex into the conversation.

Brendan Sheehan: The internet connectivity has allowed it to be either a federal crime or a state crime. And it could be prosecuted either way.

McGregor Scott: California, until extremely recently, has had a very weak law on possession of child pornography, so we've really been the only game in town in terms of a true felony count for possession of child pornography. So our ability to get a felony conviction obtained, really very real legitimate sentences and get these guys off the streets for extended periods of time is going to do nothing except make our community safer.

Flint Waters: It's critical to work closely with our US Attorney's office, where an individual and state court might give probation or a year in jail, we often can get much heavier sentences through the coordination of our assistant US attorneys that are assigned to investigate these cases.

McGregor Scott: We've had a number of cases in past years up to the present where we have partnered with district attorneys where they will prosecute the same suspect for child molestation charges, while we will prosecute that person for child pornography charges.

Brendan Sheehan: We use that as a heavy hammer when we have cases in the state system.

Arnold Bell: The Brownie case is a case that involves a little girl who was being sexually abused by an adult. This particular case probably has the worst images I've ever seen. The pictures were seen in late November of 2003 in Denmark. The officer in Denmark put it on a network that was run by Interpol, sent to the Canadians, the Canadian, Toronto police. The Toronto police had done some training with us prior to that. They got the pictures, they looked at it, they saw the Brownie uniform that appeared to them to be an American uniform. They contacted agents here. The perpetrator had obliterated the Brownie troop number on the uniform. The agent and the officers from Toronto were able to locate that number and put it to a location in North Carolina. The agents in North Carolina went out and identified the victim, identified the perpetrator, and ended up arresting the perpetrator, who was actually the father of this young girl. Some of the picture that we saw, the girl was in a dog kennel; naked, locked in a dog kennel crying, the girl was naked with a butcher knife across her chest, there were carvings on her chest that says kill me slut, that kind of stuff, urination on the child. In the exploitation of this, the data that we recovered at the search, we found, I believe, 180,000 images of child abuse.

Michelle Collins: It's terrible that these children are going to have to live for the rest of their lives, not only having to live with what happened to them, but the fact that their exploitation is now showed around the world with individuals who are getting sexual gratification by collecting their photos.

Arnold Bell: There's been a positive impact in respect that everyone in the Bureau and everyone across the law enforcement community that works this violation is on the same

page. Once you make that relationship, that relationship lasts, and it goes across all programs.

Michelle Collins: Everybody has a tool that they can bring towards this fight against child sexual exploitation. Whether it be the US Attorneys office, or the ICAC task force, or the Innocent Images program within your community, the local law enforcement agencies, as well as, entities such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Arnold Bell: Whatever the turf battles might be, whatever the conflicts might be between inter-agencies; when we're talking about this issue, all that stuff falls away. We're all kind of focused on the same thing. We're all focused on saving kids. From where I sit, there is no option for that. We can't be effective if we're not working together—we just can't.

Michelle Collins: I think if you'll speak with most investigators or prosecutors, the one key component that you'll hear in the success of these types of cases is collaboration with other agencies.

Brendan Sheehan: It's been a successful prosecution team with the US Attorneys, and the county prosecutors, and local law enforcement all working together in doing the number one goal, which everyone wants, is protect our children.

Arnold Bell: The law enforcement is working together. We're very aggressive. We're much more aggressive than we were even a couple of years ago in terms of addressing this problem. But it's a huge problem.

McGregor Scott: It's far more important, I think, that this not be the flavor of the month. We want this to be a very sustained operation that has meaningful results to ensure safer communities.

Regina Schofield: Task forces cannot do it alone. We will need the help of every individual in the law enforcement community. I encourage you, whether you are a parent, concerned law enforcement member, at the federal, state, or local level, we must all do what we can as concerned citizens and criminal justice professionals to make sure that our children are kept safe.

McGregor Scott: The best long-term solution here, is information and education. We've got to prevent our way out of this problem.

Regina Schofield: You can help me teach parents that they must stay vigilant, stay smart, and most of all, let's work together to make sure we are keeping our children safe from online sexual exploitation. To stop this problem from becoming more pervasive than it is, we need three elements coming together. We need education, we need prevention, and we need enforcement. Project Safe Childhood pulls all those elements together to make sure we are keeping America's children safe.

Alberto Gonzales: In order to confront this threat to our kids, we must rise up together as soldiers in the armies of compassion, called to action by President Bush. The core idea behind Project Safe Childhood remains the key to its success. And that's the idea of teamwork. Project Safe Childhood makes a single powerful team out of all of us who want to protect children. If we work separately, we are no match for these criminals, but when we work together, our network is much stronger than their's. Make no mistake, this is a war. Our opposition is obsessed with hurting our children. We must be obsessed with protecting them. I want to thank you for your dedication to this cause. I look forward to continuing this fight together. Each of us is but one soldier, in the armies of compassion I mentioned earlier. But we will prevail, as long as we can count on each other to be out there fighting shoulder to shoulder, our voices united as one. Thank you for your work to make Project Safe Childhood a success.