Dear Alice,

I have an email address and chat with some of my friends online. My problem is I have to keep changing my email address because someone/people keep hacking into my email account. It is very frustrating. I try to keep my password and account as secure as possible, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. Also I keep getting people I don't know adding me to their contacts lists on my chat program. They pretend they know me and say they go to my school. For example, one guy who said his name was Carl said I gave him my email address in assembly at school. I knew this was a lie because I go to an all-girls school. I really want this to stop, but I don't know how!

From,
Annoyed and Upset Girl

Answer

Dear Annoyed and Upset Girl,

Chatting online may be an excellent way to connect? it's free and instantaneous. And who doesn't love communicating with emoticons? It would make anyone annoyed and upset to have to deal with the harassment you're experiencing. You're on the right track thus far with the steps you've taken to protect yourself online. Some more tips to try include:

- **Avoid sharing your password with anyone, no matter how close you are to them.** Some people choose to share their passwords with people they're dating or their closest friends, sometimes as a way of demonstrating trust or closeness. Unfortunately, some people may take advantage of this. Try to keep passwords to email accounts, chat rooms, social networking websites, or any other online space that you visit to yourself only.
- **Are you logging in on public computers?** Remember to log off when you're done and to delete the browser's history. Most web browsers have an option in the pull down menu at the top of the screen that lets you delete browsing history. This is a good safety measure to use whenever you login to your account on any shared computer.
- **Use a screen name that doesn't resemble your real name.** May people who aren't friends of yours identify you by your screen name? Make sure it's something totally different from your real name.
- **Get into the habit of changing your password every few weeks and keep it hidden if you write it down.**
Some password tips: use at least eight characters and mix it up (use symbols, numbers, spaces, upper and lower case) if the site allows for them.

- **If people add you to their chat list and you don’t know them, decline them.** If this option isn’t available, block them entirely. Check your privacy settings. Can you make your screen name and email invisible to others who aren’t on your list? This may be a good safety measure, as well.

- **Consider switching to another email provider.** Some providers have better spam blockers and privacy settings than others. If you continue to experience trouble with your current account, consider switching.

Your skepticism about "Carl" and other strangers who have tried to chat with you is right on. Generally speaking, it’s unwise to chat with or email someone who is harassing you. If someone is persistent, however, it may be useful to set a clear boundary by very clearly telling that person to stop. "Do not contact me anymore" is sufficient. Make sure you save all of the chats or messages from the person? documented evidence of the harassment may come in handy, even though you may have the urge to erase the messages. Lastly, if you feel unsafe or threatened, notify appropriate authorities or call the police. Hopefully, changing services or taking extra precautions with your password will be enough to stop this and you can go back to learning new emoticons.

Happy chatting ;)

Alice!

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Published date:
Oct 15, 2010

Last reviewed on:
Apr 02, 2015