

Internet Safety

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The Internet can be a useful learning tool for kids. Children can have access to educational resources and current events. They use their home computers to do Internet research for school, write essays, create presentations, and do other assignments. They also use them to e-mail friends, play games, and visit Web sites that focus on other interests and hobbies. Many kids today use their computers to access and download music. However, even with its positive uses, the Internet does pose risks.

Every parent should know that there are ways to keep your child safe while surfing the Internet. You must educate your child about what kinds of sites are OK for them to explore and those that are not. Tell your child not to give out identifying information such as name or home address. We once taught children about “stranger danger”, and to not take candy from strangers, but the reality of today’s technology means that we all need to teach our children about the good and bad of the Internet. Parents can purchase blocking software to limit their child's access to Web sites, and sometimes this helps. The best way to protect your children is to be involved in their lives and keep the lines of communication open.

Many parents actively limit and monitor their kids' Internet activity. A 2006 survey conducted by Harris Interactive reports that 94 percent of parents surveyed have taken some steps to ensure their children's safe and responsible use of the Internet. Reportedly, 88 percent talk to their kids about how to use the Internet; 82 percent monitor online use; 75 percent keep kids' computers in open family space; 74 percent set limits on their children's Internet use; and 55 percent install software to limit or block online activities.

All schools have Internet filtering software in place as required by the Children’s Internet Protection Act. This helps the schools prevent children from accidentally accessing inappropriate web sites. One problem is that kids at home sometimes have no parent monitoring their computer use, so they begin to think it is okay to access certain sites. I have found that many teenagers are posting photos and personal information on web sites like Xanga and MySpace from their home computers and then think they should be able to access these personal networking (and dating) sites from school. Sites like those simply are not allowed at all at school to help protect our children.

It's not just computers that parents should monitor but also cell phones. New cell phones with Internet access now have text messaging abilities. Sometimes we forget that Instant Messaging, or “IMing,” can lead children to give out personal information to people they don’t even actually know. That 15-year-old boy from Ohio your daughter met from her MySpace account may not be who he says. The new “chat” features and “blog” style of diaries available to our children can allow complete strangers to view details about their lives meant only for their closest trusted friends. The days of having a written diary under the pillow have now turned to IMing friends on the computer or text messaging on the cell phone.

Please take the time this holiday season to talk to your children about Internet safety. If your family is fortunate enough to receive a new computer from Santa this year, please sit down and have a face-to-face “chat” about the good and the evil in the Internet world. There are so very many wonderful things to see and learn on the ‘Net – Please keep it safe.