

Child and Teen Internet Safety

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Summary Kids spend hours online but the Internet also has a dangerous side. It's up to parents to keep their children safe.

Introduction

Inappropriate Web content abounds, as do online predators. While it's a challenge, if parents get involved and use the right tools, they can minimize the danger to their children and teens.

Predators and pornography

Sexual predators prowl the Internet, and there's no shortage of Web sites with offensive and inappropriate content.

According to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), one in five Americans aged ten to seventeen encountered sexual online solicitations during 1999. That was seven years ago, well before the widespread popularity of blogs, social networking sites, and instant messaging (IM). These days kids are chatting, emailing, and posting personal information and images on Web sites. Regrettably, online predators have become adept at using these technologies to approach children and teens.

Online predators aren't the only problem. The same NCMEC study also found that one in four youngsters happened upon inappropriate sexual images while surfing the Web; only about four in ten told a parent about it.

Get educated

Parents need to educate themselves about their kids' online activities. From IM and chat rooms to blogs and social networking sites, parents need to learn what these technologies do, how they work, and how their kids are using them.

MySpace.com and other social networking sites have become very popular among teens. These Web sites give kids a way to share ideas, images, and information about themselves. Many adults use these sites, too, and it's not uncommon to find lurid content on their pages. Moreover, according to a recent MSNBC report, predators have recently begun using these sites to approach and sexually assault young teens. The hosts of these sites put restrictions on content and try to enforce minimum age limits. However, it's simply too difficult to adequately control all the content, given the volume of traffic and information. It's up to parents to get involved and take control.

Get involved and take control

Parents can take positive steps to control how their kids use the Internet.

- Learn what your kids are doing - Ask your kids about their favorite online hangouts and who they meet there. Find out if they have a blog, a Web site, an IM account, or email accounts.
- Educate your kids – Be clear about the kinds of personal information your children should not divulge over the Internet, including their names, addresses, and phone numbers. Teach your kids what to do if a stranger approaches them online. Specifically, tell them to cut off communication with any person they don't know and to notify you immediately.
- Set Internet policies - Create family policies for email, IM, blogs, and social networking accounts—including the kinds of programs your kids can use. Use the Norton Parental Control feature in **Norton Internet Security** to block access to restricted programs and sites. **Parental control** is also available in Norton Internet Security for Macintosh.
- Monitor your kids' accounts - Make sure you know who your children are meeting online. Match the online identity of every person they communicate with to make sure it's someone you know and trust. Regularly check their buddy lists and address books for new and unfamiliar names.
- Make the Internet a family activity - Maybe more important than anything else, keep your computers in a central part of the house; that way you can stay involved and keep an eye on what your kids are doing.

Conclusion

Kids surf, chat, email, and post personal information online. The Internet is rife with dangers for children and teens, so parents need to get educated and get involved.