

Keeping your Kids Safe on the Internet

April 7, 2006

Summary The Internet is an exciting, eye-opening place. Education and entertainment sites abound. However, there are certain places in the digital world children shouldn't go, certain people and kinds of information they aren't prepared to encounter.

A click of the mouse, a few taps on the keyboard, and your child is no longer in her room, at least not virtually. She's outside your home, moving through the digital world, exploring, learning, interacting with others. The Internet is an exciting, eye-opening place. Education and entertainment sites abound. They take children to places ordinarily out of reach, providing windows into the past, pathways to exotic locations, and unique perspectives on current events. The Internet can spark imaginations and open young minds. It's also loads of fun.

However, there are certain places in the digital world children shouldn't go, certain people and kinds of information they aren't prepared to encounter. Children can easily stumble across sexual, violent, or otherwise offensive Web sites. They may receive unwanted attention from adults in chat rooms or over email. They're the unwitting targets of deceptive online advertising and marketing campaigns, some of which attempt to elicit private, family information. So, what can you as a parent do? How can you strike a balance between protecting your children on the Internet and empowering them to explore the digital world?

Educate yourself and your kids

Get to know the Internet. Investigate what it has to offer your children and teens. Make some decisions about the kinds of sites and services you want your children to access and the kinds of areas you want them to avoid. Then, call a family meeting. Tell your kids what you think about the online world. Describe the kinds of sites you believe are **valuable and safe**. Encourage your children to visit those places. Describe the kinds of sites you believe are unsafe and why. Ask your children about their favorite online hangouts and answer any questions or concerns they have about the Net. Teach your kids to be savvy surfers, to check the sources of information they find on the Web. Tell them to verify the identity of persons who contact them in chat rooms or by email. Talk with them about advertising and teach them how to recognize the difference between site content and promotional material. The more Internet savvy you and your family are, the safer you'll all be online.

Set ground rules

With a solid base of family communication and Internet know-how, you'll be prepared to set some ground rules. Make a list of restricted site categories and addresses. Set time limits on Internet and computer usage, including when and how long your kids can be online. Come up with a family policy for email accounts, as well as a policy for spending money over the Net. Describe the kinds of personal information it's acceptable to provide online, and list in detail the kinds of information your children are not allowed to divulge. (Passwords, physical addresses, and credit card numbers are prime candidates for your restricted list.) When developing your **family Internet policies**, consider the rules you already have in place and make certain your Internet rules are consistent. If you don't let your children give your home address to strangers on the street, don't let them give it to strangers in chat rooms. Finally, hold your children accountable for their actions on the Internet. Show them you take Internet safety seriously.

Online accounts and services for children

Web-based services and technologies can help reinforce and complement your Internet ground rules. Internet service providers (ISPs) have developed a variety of tools for protecting your kids online. Most ISPs offer some type of account for children and teens. These accounts limit access to a pre-defined set of kid-friendly services. Many ISPs also employ customized filters designed to prevent children from reaching sites parents deem inappropriate. Check with your ISP to see what services they offer.

You'll also find most Web-based email services offer accounts for children. Like children's Internet accounts, these email accounts restrict access to adult email services. To open a child's email account, the service provider usually requires the parent to create a supervisory family account. Some even ask for a parent or guardian's written consent.

These Web-based services and technologies are often free, and they're an easy way to provide at least some supervision in your absence. Of course, they're not fail-safe, and children are smart enough to get around some of the restrictions. For example, kids can easily create adult-level email accounts without proving they're over 18. Once again, getting involved with your children and setting up Internet accounts together is the best way to ensure an open and safe online experience.