

Keeping Your Kids Safe Online

Depending on the ages of your children, they may be spending anywhere from two (2) to seven and a half (7 1/2) hours a day on the Internet. Whether they are young children playing simple games, or older ones doing research for school, socializing through email or social networking sites, or playing more sophisticated games online, most children are on the Internet at least some time every day.

Less than a generation ago, the Internet was available solely through computers. Today, it can be accessed through mobile phones and game consoles, as well as the computer. Doubtless, devices and applications will continue to be developed that will allow faster and easier access to the Internet.

The Internet is a double-edged sword for children. It opens new worlds to them: they can learn about numerous subjects, get help with homework and make new friends. Children can keep in touch with friends and family, no matter where they live. They can even share pictures and videos, on cell phones as well as on computers. New advances even allow users to speak to and see each other in real time online.

The opportunities offered by the Internet, however, also make children vulnerable to certain risks. Many children (and even some adults) do not understand the consequences of disclosing personal information, such as full name, address, email address, phone number, cell phone number, social security number or other information that allows them to be contacted online or offline. For example, submitting personal information to a website operator for registration purposes will allow the operator and anyone with whom he shares that information to contact a child, or the child's parents, with unwanted marketing solicitations.

In addition, children's use of the Internet, whether on computers, cell phones or other devices, without parental supervision, can lead to exposure to inappropriate information, spreading gossip and inappropriate pictures, bullying, stalking, and even overtures from predators. Remember, the ability to post personal information in chat rooms, forums or other groups allows anyone on the site to see that information and contact your child.

One thing parents can do is use filters and parental settings on home computers. Remember, however, that when your children go online at their friends' homes, those computers may not have the same filters and settings. Equally important, the filters on your home's computer do not extend to your child's mobile phone. Find out what limits and security are available for your child's mobile phone from your mobile phone service provider, and think about turning off web access features or turning on filtering features.

What you and your child should know about the Internet: The increasing number of virtual worlds, in which users can communicate through instant messaging, chat boxes, private messaging, or message boards, makes use of the Internet more and more interactive. While adults may realize that the Internet can allow many more people than they intend to see what they post, this is a hard concept for children to comprehend.

Federal law, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, (often referred to as COPPA), and CARU's self-regulatory guidelines on privacy protection (commonly referred to as the Guidelines) aim to limit the collection of personal information from children under 13, and require parental consent before a website operator can collect personal information from or allow the posting of that information by children. Remember, however, that neither COPPA nor the Guidelines can take the place of attentive parents who communicate effectively with their children.

The most important thing that parents can do to keep their children safe on the Internet is to talk to them about it. Explain, in a way that your child will understand (but that will not scare them), that use of the Internet, in addition to offering information and socializing, can be a source of potential harm. Explain the precautions that you take when posting information, pictures, or films online. Remind them that once something is online, it can be used by anyone who sees it. Discuss the websites they currently visit or those they wish to join and let them know you want them to be even more careful.

Educate Yourself: Know the details of all the sites your children currently visit or would like to visit, and see for yourself what activities are available, and what personal information each site allows children to post in chat rooms, forums, etc. Many sites require children to register before they can participate in the site's activities. Visit these sites and find out what personal information (for example, full name, email address, street address, etc.) they require children to submit for registration and whether they allow children to post personal information in forums, chat rooms, etc.

While sites targeted at children 13 are required (under the Guidelines and COPPA) to post privacy policies, not all do so. If a privacy policy is posted, don't assume that it reflects the site's actual practices. Know what has to be listed in a privacy policy: name, address, phone number and email address of the website operator; the types of personal information collected from children; how the information is or may be used by the operator; whether it will be publicly available through a chat room, forum or other means. See if the site's privacy has all the necessary information.

Under the Guidelines and COPPA, websites are required not only to give you notice of what information your child can disclose online, but also to obtain your permission ("parental consent") before they collect any personal information from your child. If you think a site has collected or disclosed information from your kids or marketed to them in a way that violates the law, report it to www.caru.org, at the Parent's Corner.

While it is not always possible to insure that children only visit sites that you have ascertained are safe and secure, do your best- keeping in mind that children are often more knowledgeable about the use of technology than we are.

If your child uses social networking sites, explore the privacy settings offered by the site, for example, limits on the people with whom your child can interact, and the types of information that can be posted. Some social networking sites allow only pre-written (canned) chat, and make it impossible to share personal information.

Even if your child is 13 or older, and not covered by COPPA or CARU'S Guidelines, let them know that you are careful about your own disclosure of personal information on the Internet and encourage them to do the same. Remind them that with greater freedom, comes greater risks and responsibilities.

CARU has jurisdiction over websites that are either directed to children under 13 years of age or those where there is a reasonable expectation that a significant number of children will be visiting. This means that CARU looks not only at sites that are aimed at children under 13, but also those, like teen sites, that many "teens" (children 8 - 14) will want to visit. If you have concerns about any such websites, please go to the Parent's Corner at the CARU website at www.caru.org, where you will find more information on our organization and an online complaint form.

For more information on children and the Internet, go to the FTC website, www.ftc.gov, or go directly to OnGuardOnline.gov, where you will find a guide called "Net Cetera - Chatting with Kids About Being Online."

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