

Keeping Your Kids Safe when They Explore the Web

No matter how fluent her French and reliable her character, you probably wouldn't hand the car keys over to your daughter and turn her loose in, say, Paris. Amidst all the culture and beauty and learning opportunities in that Old World city, there are just too many dark alleys, too many sights she's not ready to process emotionally, too many questionable characters eager to take advantage of her naïveté.

Yet many of us give our children the keys to the "Electronic World" via home internet connections and turn them loose to explore. Yes, they're fluent in internet-speak, can navigate the World Wide Web more skillfully than we can, and with a few clicks of the mouse can have access to a treasure chest of fascinating information and plain old fun. But today's e-world has its dangers, too.

The world at their fingertips

Certainly, the advantages of internet access for your children far outweigh the disadvantages. Using the internet (which includes services like the World Wide Web, chat rooms, and e-mail) can help your children

- learn researching skills like fact-gathering, information analysis, and source evaluation.
- connect with other children, schools, scientists, relatives, and news services all over the world, enriching their lives and broadening their views of other cultures and countries.
- "visit" museums, cities, national parks, and other places they would otherwise never see.

Surfing in dangerous waters

Computer access and internet skills, by themselves, won't make your child a good student. The internet is only a tool.

Computer use can be overdone. It may be especially tempting for children struggling with social relationships or difficult family situations to immerse themselves in the e-world, exacerbating their social challenges.

In addition, without a proper introduction to the internet's limitations, young users can easily be misled. Anyone can post anything on the World Wide Web, no matter how false or misleading. Marketers target them and inundate them with tempting or misleading advertising.

And, of course, the E-World's back alleys can lead to pornography, offensive language, illegal materials, and potentially dangerous strangers.

Untangling the web with your child

- Limit computer time. Make sure your kids have plenty of outdoor activities and exercise, time with friends and family, and strong personal relationships with good role models.
- Spend as much time as you can with your children while they're using the computer. When you can't be there personally, be "present" through e-mail messages.
- Teach your kids to be discerning evaluators of advertisements, websites, and the sources of information they locate online.
- Consider installing control software that limits your children's access to certain sites and their ability to give out personal information. (Check with your internet service provider. Some web browsers include control features.) But remember, such software will not totally protect your children.

Resources

The Children's Partnership offers a free online map to the e-world for parents called *The Parents' Guide to the Information Superhighway*. You can see it at their website at www.childrenspartnership.org. Or order it by mail for \$5: Children's Partnership, 1351 3rd Street Promenade, Suite 206, Santa Monica, CA 90401.

Good e-citizenship

Insist that your children be good internet citizens. Develop a computer-use contract to sign together. Possible contractual items:

I won't give out personal information (address, phone number, a photo, school information, credit card numbers) without my parents' permission.

I will not respond to messages that are mean, obscene, threatening, or in any way make me feel uncomfortable. I'll tell my parents right away about such messages.

I will never agree to get together with someone I've met online without checking with my parents first.

I will use clean language.

I'll never slander or hurt anyone.

I will treat friends and strangers with respect.

I will not break the law by hacking into someone else's computer.

Kid troubles? Call the Student Assistance Program and arrange to see a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members. Call (515) 244-6090 or toll free (800) 327-4692. Counselors are on call 24 hours a day.