

Keep Your Child Safe on the Information Highway

The Information Highway, a.k.a., the Internet, provides children with easy access to virtual libraries, interactive learning games, and communication programs that let them chat with people from anywhere in the world. The Internet can be an amazing tool for learning and skill-building, but parents and their children need to beware of its darker side.

The Internet can be fraught with danger for young users. It holds a lot of inaccurate, unethical, and sexually explicit information for children who are curious and vulnerable to exploitation. With a few clicks of a mouse button, children can be exposed to sites that distribute images of graphic violence and pornography, images from which children are normally protected. It can also give dangerous sexual predators, and other unsavory types, access to children through on-line forums, chat-rooms, instant messaging, and email.

Where's the danger?

Teenagers and younger children are often curious about sexuality and, when unsupervised, might be tempted to seek out information on sexually explicit websites, which are easy to access and plentiful through the most common search engines. Web masters of pornographic sites often promote their content in ways that attract unintended audiences; for example, users can innocently type the word zoo in the search field of their search engine program and find that one of the first items to appear on the results menu is one you would prefer your child never see.

Many reputable, high-quality, educational sites offer forums and chat rooms where kids can learn from each other, develop communication skills, share mutual interests, and join together for good

works. Child predators can also get on these web sites and lie about who they are. Via internet chats, they can pretend to be whatever type person they think will attract children they wish to exploit. These kinds of predators take their time getting to know a child, getting him or her to open up with personal information such as full names and addresses. Children have been seduced to secretly meet with on-line predators which has often ended with disastrous results.

Is Your Child at Risk?

The FBI describes warning signs that are indicators that your child might be at risk from on-line predators. It's best not to panic if you recognize these behaviors in your child, but be alert and follow up. Here are seven behaviors to watch for:

- The child spends a lot of unsupervised time on-line, especially at night.
- Pornography is found on the child's computer or his or her computer disks.
- The child receives calls from or makes calls to adults you don't know.
- A child receives gifts, mail, or packages from someone you don't know.
- A child quickly turns the computer monitor off or changes the screen when you enter the room. (The child might just wish privacy for writing in a electronic diary, so stay calm, but let your child know that secrecy is not acceptable when using the Internet.)
- The child withdraws from the family.
- The child is using an on-line account belonging to someone else.

Minimize the risks.

- Talk to your child about on-line exploitation and other on-line risks.
- Polish up your own computer know-how. When you understand how

Internet programs work, you can implement parental-control programs available through your service provider, review a history of what sights have been visited, and monitor electronic communications.

- Spend time with your child on-line. Have the child show you his or her favorite on-line destinations.
- Keep the computer in a common room in the house with the monitor screen facing into the room.
- Maintain access to your child's on-line account. Randomly check his or her email. (Be honest with your child about it and explain why.)
- Instruct your child never to transmit photos or any identifying information to someone they don't know in person.
- Tell the child never to respond to messages, postings or calls that are suggestive, obscene, mean-spirited, belligerent, or harassing.
- Explain that it is important to be skeptical of on-line information which may or may not be true.

Parent for Internet activity as you parent in the real world. Teach your children not to talk to strangers when you are not with them, know where they are and who they are with, and educate them about safe and unsafe destinations and behaviors.

Problems? Call the Student Assistance Program (SAP) and arrange to talk to a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members.

Call (515) 244-6090 or (800) 327-4692.
TTY: (515) 288-9022 or (877) 542-6488.
