



Safe Surfing Guidelines for Parents

By taking responsibility for your child(ren)'s online computer use, parents can greatly minimize any potential risks of being online.

Make it a family rule to:

- ★ Never give out identifying information - home address, school name, or telephone number - in a public message forum such as chat or bulletin boards, and always be sure you're dealing with someone that both you and your child know and trust before giving it out via e-mail.
- ★ Think carefully before revealing any personal information about you or your family, such as age, marital status, or financial information. Consider using a pseudonym or unlisting your child's name if your service allows it.
- ★ Never respond to messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, abusive, belligerent, threatening, or make you feel uncomfortable. Encourage your children to tell you if they encounter any such messages. If you or your child receives a message that is harassing, of a sexual nature, or threatening, forward a copy of the message to your service provider and ask for their assistance.
- ★ Instruct your child **not** to click on any links that are contained in e-mail from persons they don't know. Such links could lead to sexually explicit or otherwise inappropriate web sites.
- ★ Never allow a child to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they meet online without parental permission. **If a meeting is arranged, make the first one in a public place**, and be sure to accompany your child.
- ★ Get to know the sites your child uses. If you don't know how to log on, get your child to show you. Find out what types of information they offer and whether there are ways for parents to block out objectionable material.
- ★ Should you become aware of the transmission, use, or viewing of child pornography while online, immediately report this to your service provider.
- ★ Remember that people online may not be who they seem. Because you can't see or even hear the person it is easy for someone to misrepresent him or herself. Therefore, someone indicating that "she" is a "12-year-old girl" could in reality be a 40-year-old man. Always be aware of the dangers.
- ★ Set reasonable rules and guidelines for computer use by your children. Decide whether or not to use parental control tools or protective software. Discuss these rules with children and put a note near the computer as a reminder. Remember to monitor their compliance of these rules, especially when it comes to the amount of time your child spends online. A child or teenager's excessive use of online services or bulletin boards, especially late at night, may be a clue that there might be a problem. Remember that personal computers and online services should not be used as electronic babysitters.
- ★ Be sure to make this a family activity. Consider keeping the computer in a family room rather than the child's bedroom. Get to know their "online friends" just as you would get to know all of their other friends.

What Are the Risks?

Important Note: With any discussion of risks, it's important to realize that the most horrendous crimes are also the least likely to happen. As with all aspects of life, the risk should be put into context. Statistically, probably the greatest risk is that a child will encounter people in chat rooms and newsgroups who are mean or unpleasant. Another "risk" is that a child will spend a lot of wasted time in areas that aren't very productive.

Physical Harassment

Although not very likely, there is a slight risk that, while online, a child might provide information or arrange an encounter that could risk his or her safety or the safety of family members. In a few cases, pedophiles have used e-mail, bulletin boards and chat areas to gain a child's confidence and then arrange a face-to-face meeting.

Exposure to Inappropriate Material

An obvious risk is that a child may be exposed to inappropriate material: material that is sexual, hateful, violent in nature, or encourages dangerous or illegal activities.

Drugs, Alcohol, Tobacco and other Dangers

Some web sites and newsgroups contain information that advocates the use of drugs, tobacco or alcohol. It's even possible to find places on the Internet where you can learn to make bombs or obtain weapons. There are no known cases as yet, where a child has committed an act of violence or used a substance as a result of going online. Yet, with a resource as vast and as uncontrolled as the Internet, you're bound to find all sorts of information, good and bad.

Objectionable Messages

A child might encounter e-mail, chat or bulletin board messages that are harassing, demeaning, or abusive. This risk may not be life threatening, but it could affect a child's self esteem and is more than likely to occur at one time or another to any child who engages in chat rooms or exchanges messages on bulletin boards, so you should be aware that this happens.

Legal and Financial

There is also the risk that a child could do something that has negative legal or financial consequences, such as giving out a parent's credit card details or doing something that violates another person's rights. Legal issues aside, children should be taught good manners on the Internet and to behave online as they would in public and to avoid being rude, mean or inconsiderate to other users.

Password Security

Children should be cautioned to never give out their passwords to anyone even if the person claims to work for an Internet service provider. When in doubt, tell children to ask permission. You should also know the provider's policy regarding passwords (most Internet Service Providers' staff will never ask a member for their password). There is a risk that an Internet account could be misused or stolen by obtaining a user's password.

Privacy

Children have a right to privacy. Everything about them: their name, age, what school they go to, is the personal business of them and their families. No one, including reputable companies, have a right to extract this information from children without first checking with the child's parents.

Gambling

There are sites that allow people to gamble with real money or just "for fun." In some cases these sites may be operating legally in the jurisdiction where they are physically located but it is generally illegal (and inappropriate) for minors to gamble regardless of where they are. Although most online gambling sites require a person to use a credit card or write a check to transfer funds.

Remember that your involvement in your child's online life, is by far the best insurance you can have of their safety.

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