

Be Informed: An Introduction to Parents about Online Safety

Take responsibility for your child's protection from online dangers. A few practical steps will go a long way. Here are some helpful principles to keep in mind as a parent:

- **Be informed.** The most important thing you can do as a parent is to become informed about the Internet and common ways that younger generations use it. Learn about the Internet world. Learn about how kids communicate through chat rooms, instant messenger, email, message boards, forums, blogs, social networking websites and video networking sites. Create a personal account on MySpace or Facebook, for instance, to become familiar with the world of online socializing.
- **Lead by example.** Your children are watching you. Many children are first exposed to pornography by following the irresponsible behaviors of their parents.
- **Keep the lines of communication open about the Internet.** Rather than denying your child access to the Internet, teach responsible online socializing. Explore the Internet together as a family. Spend time online with your kids. Let your children know what they can do online that is constructive and fun. Have them talk about both their good and bad experiences. Teach children to talk to you if they see something online that makes them feel uncomfortable, confused, or scared. Teach them to tell you if they feel threatened by someone online. Emphasize, especially to younger children, if they stumble across something objectionable that it isn't their fault. Encourage them to talk openly.
- **Create a “pledge” or list of rules for Internet use.** Create a list of computer rules and post it near the monitor of the computer. NetSmartz has created age-specific Internet Safety Pledges that can be printed off and signed by both the child and the parent. Go to <http://www.netsmartz.org/resources/pledge.htm>
- **Monitor what your child does on the Internet.** This can be done several ways. Be the primary computer administrator and hold all the passwords. If you don't know how, take the time to learn. Use Covenant Eyes Accountability Software to keep track of every website visited by your child. If your children have an online account, ask that they show it to you. This doesn't need to be a “surprise inspection.” Let them know in advance that you would like to see it. They might evaluate on their own, “Does my account include things I would want my parents knowing about?”
- **Consider a filter program and a child-friendly search engine.** One such filter is the Covenant Eyes Filter. The most restricted setting on this filter will allow your child access to only web sites that you pre-approve. You can also use the filter to restrict times of day that your child can go online. For older children, the CE filter can be set to a less restricted setting. Do not rely on filters alone. Educate your children on the dangers of the Internet.
- **Keep the computer in a visible location and be aware of other places where your child has access to the Internet.** Keep the computer in a common area of the house. The computer needs to be easily visible when passing by. Be aware that there are other places to go online. More and more children can now access pornography through cell phones, iPods, and PSPs (Sony's Playstation Portable).
- **Introduce your child to online communities at the appropriate time.** Based on your child's age and maturity level, decide whether they should have an online profile. Many times children under 16 years of age are not mature enough to handle the challenges of social networking sites.
- **Talk to your kids about posting personal information online.** Teach them to think before posting personal information such as a full name, address, phone number, email address, social security number, credit card information, family information, and pictures or videos of themselves. This especially applies to chat rooms. Remind them that once personal information is online, it may be circulated and impossible to erase. Screen names for children should be nondescript: they should not indicate any personal information, including their age.
- **Talk to your kids about who they befriend online.** Set the expectation that only people your child knows in real life should be a “friend” on a social networking site. Tell your children never to meet in person someone that they first “met” online. If you suspect any stalking or sexual exploitation of your child, report it to your local law enforcement agency.
- **Talk to your kids about appropriate online etiquette (netiquette).** Teach your children to avoid “sex talk” online. Research shows that teens who avoid talking about sex are less likely to be contacted by an online predator. Teach them how to respond to disturbing material or “cyberbullying” (offensive, gossipy, or dangerous email, chat, etc.). Teach them to tell you when they feel bullied.
- **If Internet use becomes a problem, limit or take away Internet access at home.** This is only as a last resort. Keep in mind that your child can establish an account and access it at a friend's house, at school, or in the library. Keep an open dialog with your kids.