

Keeping Kids Safe Online

Your child is surfing the Web, you need to be paddling right alongside him — or at least observing him carefully from the shore. While the Internet offers goodies galore (educational materials, fun games, and connections with people all over the world), it can also pose risks to your child's physical safety and emotional well-being.

"Social networking sites, chat rooms, iTunes, and IM are unfamiliar terrain to many parents," says James P. Steyer, CEO and founder of Common Sense Media. "We launched the Internet Safe and Smart campaign to empower parents with simple safety tools so that you can confidently embrace the online world your kids study and play in," says Steyer.

Here's what appeals — and what's dangerous — about several popular ways kids use the Internet, along with suggested rules to keep them safe. The bottom line: Communicate with your child. Discuss what she's doing online and why. Set rules, and talk about them. Then keep talking, since your child can earn more rights and responsibilities as she grows. If she feels comfortable with these conversations, she will be more likely to let you know when she runs into an online bully or stumbles upon inappropriate content. Be a role model with your own Internet habits, since your child is likely to emulate your behavior.

Safety Standards

These basic rules apply to kids of all ages; visit Commonsense.com for age-by-age tips.

- 1. Limit usage.** Permit your child have free online time for, say, 30 minutes right after school to instant-message friends, play games, or visit social networking sites, but make it a rule that family time starts with dinner. After that the computer is used for homework and it's an IM-free zone.
- 2. Keep kids in sight.** Have the computer centrally located. Your child is less likely to browse questionable content if she knows Mom or Dad (or her brother or sister) might walk by at any second. This helps you monitor time spent online, chosen activities, and resultant behavior.
- 3. Do your homework.** Check his browser history to know where your child goes online, and check the sites regularly. Use security tools and privacy features — whether offered by your browser or Internet service provider, or purchased separately — for extra protection. GetNetWise has more information about these safety features. Once installed, make sure these parental controls are really keeping him out of trouble (follow the instructions for your particular tool to learn how to use it best). Then follow up — by adjusting the settings on your safety filter, and by continuing to talk to your child about what's safe and acceptable.

Kids' Faves

Use this overview to understand what kids love to do online — and what risks go along with the rewards.

Communicating and social networking: Online communication consists primarily of email, instant messaging (IMs), chat rooms, and journals or web logs (blogs). On networking sites such as MySpace.com, kids can create web pages or profiles, and then invite others to view and become online buddies. Your child may use these media to share gossip, exchange photos, make weekend plans, find out about missed assignments, connect over common interests, and express opinions. A quiet kid can showcase personality and develop communication skills. These activities offer a powerful sense of community, and the dedicated fan base gives kids a feeling of instant celebrity.

What to know: One out of every five kids gets sexual solicitations online. Strangers, predators, and cyber-bullies all target children, and their work is simplified when screen names reveal age, gender, or home town. If posts aren't marked as private, personal information can be displayed to an unrestricted audience of readers. And even after you or your child remove once-public material, it is not necessarily gone. Parties and events can also be publicized, attracting inappropriate guests. On a less sinister note, IMing and blogging are prime distractions during homework hours. Finally, know that spam, spyware, and viruses can use these channels to attack unprotected computers.

What to do:

- **Know who your child talks to online.** Review her buddy list: Does she really know everyone, or are some buddies "friends of friends"? Have her remove anyone whom she hasn't met in person.
- **Tell him not to exchange personal information** like a phone number, address, best friend's name, or picture. No party invitations, revealing details, or meeting in person — ever. Explain that almost any personal information can be useful to someone trying to figure out who he is or where he lives: the name of his piano teacher, school or the fact that he plays 2nd base on a traveling baseball team. If he has a MySpace page or other online profile, check it regularly for inappropriate information.

Web surfing: Kids can explore new interests, check to see if a library book is available, or find a recipe for the class party in valuable resources and resources such as online encyclopedias, newspapers, and periodicals.

What to know: Surfing the web without restrictions can mean encountering pop-up ads, viruses, erroneous information, and inappropriate content. The ease of cutting and pasting means that plagiarism is a real concern. And time flies online! Kids can click from one site to another until bedtime (or beyond), if you let them.

What to do:

- **Set a code of conduct and time limits.** Set guidelines about suitable language, content, and behavior. While it's important to direct your child to suitable websites, it's even more valuable to help her recognize the redeeming qualities of those sites, so she can surf safely on her own. Agree on how much free time online you'll allow.
- **Critique content.** Help your child think critically about the content he reads and sees. Encourage him to check facts with multiple sources before including them in a school report. Try to distinguish between user-generated content and reputable institutions; point out the difference between addresses that end in .edu (usually university-related), .gov (government), .com (commercial entities), and .org (non-profit — but not necessarily agenda-free — organizations). Make sure he understands the difference between paraphrasing and just plain copying.

Downloading and Gaming: Kids can quickly download an audio book or burn a mix CD for a long car trip. They can find the newest releases without leaving the house or waiting in line. It's fast, convenient — and requires more parental involvement than other activities. Games are educational and sharpen logic or literary skills. They keep kids entertained and cure the boredom blues.

What to know: Downloads are not always free, and some are illegal — be sure your tween can recognize the difference. If you let her buy a song, make sure the computer does not store your credit card information. Downloads can contain viruses, and a large collection can tax your computer's memory.

Games are especially addictive! Some are graphic and promote violence or stereotypes. It's important to remember they are not always free. Sign-up usually requires an email address or screen name.

What to do:

- **Limit spending.** Set price limits for games, songs, movies, or other purchases. Be sure to monitor downloads and make sure they are legal, shared content with no hidden fees or commitments. Don't give kids your credit card number.
- **Issue safety reminders.** Privacy rules apply to gaming sites, too: Your child should avoid revealing handles like "Sara42394" or "BoiseBrett." Most games have a chat room feature, and the content is often inappropriate. Have him keep the chat window turned off or hidden. Post these safety tips for kids near the computer. <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=7290>