

bitdefender

Guide to Children's Online Safety



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I've got good news and bad news.

The good news first. Your child has the opportunity to be a contributing member of a thriving community. A place where they can speak to kids who are just like them or are intriguingly different. Where they can expand their understanding of their own world while learning about others. Where they can help and be helped. Teach and be taught. Find a new hobby or investigate a potential career.

The bad news is we now have to sit our kids down for a new kind of talk. The online safety talk. You've got the old one down pat: before you send your child out into the neighborhood to meet up with a friend, you give them the basics-- don't talk to strangers, go directly to your destination, and make sure there's an adult to supervise. This one is just the same, but requires a bit more vigilance and a lot more savvy.

Think of it this way. The Internet is like a much bigger neighborhood... bigger, in fact, than the biggest cities in the world. Sure, you've gotta be a little street smart and pay attention along the way, because you never know who you're going to meet. But, around every corner lurks potential, education and opportunity. You've just gotta learn how to navigate around safely.

That's where you come in.

Parents and teachers are in a fantastically powerful position to help shape children's views of the Internet beginning from a very early age. Just as we coach our kids in healthy social interactions, Internet safety must be taught early and continuously.

This guide will give you an overview of a few key points to teach children how to be 'net smart and to encourage an open dialogue between schools and home life to solidify the message. While this list is helpful and a great place to start, it's certainly not exhaustive.

The Internet is a part of life-- and an exciting one at that! Invite your children to be a part of the new world. Go with them on their journey. Instill wonder, curiosity, and street smarts.

And above all, enjoy the ride.

1. Teach online safety by example.

Think back to the days when you were learning to drive. At first, you were a passenger while your parents drove and explained what they were doing and why. Next, they turned the wheel over to you, but coached you through your good and bad choices. Eventually, you were allowed out on your own, but with some additional rules and a few impromptu lessons, as needed. Finally, you had your license and were given full rein, but were expected to stay out of trouble...or else. Using the Internet is just like teaching your child to drive, but starts much earlier and has a much longer "permit" period.

Accompany children at an early age into a chat room and message board. Decide together how to respond, and recognize your "teaching moments" when your child (or someone else's) interacts in an unsafe or inappropriate manner. Laugh together as you sculpt a funny but respectful reply and discuss amongst yourselves what could've been done differently. Once you feel comfortable, let them make the decisions alone and give some feedback on their choices.

Teachers and school counselors may be well-served to include this form of communication in their social skills curriculum. This exercise builds mutual trust and openness but above all, it's fun! Just don't hit the brakes too hard or too early! Which leads us to the next tip...

2. Online activities must be age-appropriate.

Facebook® may scare you. MySpace® may make you cringe. Twitter® may baffle you. And the thought of a child posting pictures of themselves wirelessly, carrying on online relationships with strangers, and detailing their thoughts to the world? Horrifying. But, did you know that through these same sites people often find jobs, engage in social action causes and hone their writing abilities? It's not all bad.

Try not to discourage interests as they develop, but rather, find age-appropriate outlets for them. While joining Facebook and MySpace as a child may be akin to handing a 10-year-old the keys to the family car, it doesn't mean they shouldn't get some sort of wheels! Find age-appropriate sites to match the maturity and safety savvy of the child.

If Facebook has too few restrictions and/or your child is under the age limit, try Kidswirl.com. Consider it like Facebook with training wheels! Kidswirl® strictly limits the amount of information shared, eliminates the offensive content and-- best of all-- allows parental control over the profile. This is a perfect opportunity for parents and teachers to allow a child to feel independent while developing their safety savvy with adult supervision.

Above all, when it comes to social networking sites, don't allow kids to bend the terms of service (ToS). If there is an age restriction in place, parents and teachers should work together and share information to make sure children are not participating in these forums. Or, if they are participating, that they are being supervised regularly and as needed.

3. Strike a balance of privacy and supervision.

There are few things more important to a child's development than a sense of individuality and self-esteem. Yet, there are few things that will destroy a relationship with a child more than an undeserving violation of privacy or an ongoing lack of trust. However, when it comes to online safety, supervision may be necessary beyond a child's desire for it. In fact, you can count on it! But, there are ways to check on a child without becoming Sherlock Holmes or too laissez faire.

Parents and teachers should explain to children that parents expect to be included in their online activities. This includes access to all types of passwords and accounts. Parents should keep a

file of this information and promise never to use it without the child present, except under extenuating circumstances, such as an emergency or a pervasive belief that there is hidden and dangerous activity. Whenever possible, make supervision a joint activity. Allowing a child to learn what you're looking for will help to reinforce the things that should not be occurring. Announcing your intent to check ahead of time will assist in maintaining the child's dignity and provide a not-so-subtle reminder that they should not get lax on their safety goals.

Now to bring out the "big guns". Some schools set up an Internet tracking program that records all activity from each computer. Recently, this has become popular with home users as well. If you feel that tracking is for you, try to think of it as a security camera-- don't review the activity every day. Review the tracking results with your child at random intervals or when something happens to justify it. Remember, creating too restrictive an environment will not prevent activity, it will just encourage creativity when hiding it. Be as transparent as you can with children and hopefully children will learn to do the same with you.

4. Use the privacy and safety tools available.

Do the easy stuff first! Many search engines and social networking sites provide options in their settings to restrict certain types of content from being displayed. Google, for example, allows you to perform a "safe search" that will exclude all adult terms and pictures from search results. There's simply no reason not to turn this on!

By the time the child becomes aware of the setting and figures out how to change it, they're probably ready for some looser boundaries anyway, right?

5. Location, location, location!

Put computers in a high-traffic common room, like your living room, den, or kitchen. Student-used computers in classrooms should be facing towards

the center of the room, not tucked away into a corner. Ideally, you should angle the computer with the monitor facing into the room (not towards a wall) to allow for one-glance supervision whenever possible.

This is great for a few reasons. One of the incredible things about the internet is the fun and funny things that can be found online! Putting the computer in a room where the groups interact is a great way to encourage kids to share what they've seen and include others.

6. Don't fan the flames.

By now we've all heard of cyber-bullying. Unfortunately, the Internet makes it nearly effortless to harass a person. Bullying occurs via e-mail, social networking, instant messaging, or any other number of ways to deliver a nasty message. You can't stop these messages from being delivered. But, you can teach how they should be received.

Given the anonymity afforded by the Internet, people tend to say things without the filter they'd usually apply in the real world. This we expect. But sometimes what happens is that a person's opinion-- or the person themselves-- brings about persistent negative attention. They become the target of a series of attacks. In the online world, we call this "flaming". And just like its namesake, flaming carries significant danger if not handled quickly and appropriately.

Schools and parents alike must have a singular message for kids-- do not respond and do report the event. Reporting can include a parent, a teacher, or a system administrator. More likely than not, flaming violates the ToS and would result in consequences to the bully. Teach kids to identify when they are being flamed and not attempt to handle the situation themselves. Frequently, withdrawing from the battle is enough to stop the attacks.

Be supportive and use the situation as a way of demonstrating how to handle this type of intrusion maturely. But be prepared to take over and remove your child from the situation altogether if warranted. Nothing anyone could say to a child online is worth compromising a person's safety, security, or sanity.

7. Accompany children across the divide.

A large majority of "online friends" that people meet stay that way-- online. They may live on the other side of the planet, they may live just a few blocks away. But, most of the time the online boundary stays firmly in place. The few times, however, that a child may want to meet a buddy-- especially if they've determined this is the greatest love of their lifetime-- be prepared... they will not take no for an answer. You can either be supportive, or be left to hope it all goes well.

Make an agreement and bring it up often. Explain that once the child has gotten to know someone online over time, that you're willing to accompany them to a public meeting place. Under no circumstances whatsoever should they be going alone. The more open-minded and respectful of their need for space you can be while setting this boundary, the better. Curiosity is natural and healthy, but it's got to be satisfied safely and intelligently. Surely even the most love-struck adolescent could agree with that kind of logic, right? Get them to agree before the situation arises and side-step a messy feeling of intrusion. And onto our final tip...

8. Talk to kids about their online activities.

There is simply no substitute for genuine interest in a child's life. Whether you're a teacher, parent, family friend, or otherwise, a child understands the difference between obligatory interest and genuine interest. Talk to children, without judgment, about what they are doing online, who they are meeting, how they're staying safe, and whether you can help with anything.

Understand that mistakes will be made. Let's face it: we all do it and children are no exception. You've Googled yourself and found something you didn't like, haven't you? If not, try it. We all learn the hard way at least once. And one day your child will slip up and tell someone a few too many details too. Ideally, you want them to come to you and explain this has happened so you can do some damage control.

This means when they do come to you, you must be calm, cool, collected and praise them for catching their own mistake. If you can turn an accidental breach of safety into a positive learning experience, you're on the right track for online safety, as well as a respectful close relationship. Nothing could be better than that!

Samantha Murphy, M.S. is a child & adolescent therapist residing in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. A lifelong Internet fanatic, Samantha has turned her passion for technology and her love of people into a career. Samantha is enthusiastic about the ever-expanding potential of the web, and believes that a "safety first" ideology will create a more progressive and positive environment. Samantha is a featured blogger on WhatToExpect.com and a freelance writer specializing in social sciences in a virtual environment for New Scientist magazine. She is forever grateful to her husband and daughter for their patience, humor, and love.