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Protecting Children Online

Deborah J. Weitzenkamp, Jennifer S. Nixon and Phyllis I. Schoenholz
Extension Educators

> This publication explains potential Internet hazards and how to protect children from them.

In an age where children are using the Internet on a daily basis, parents need to be aware of how children use it, potential online hazards, how to recognize signs that their children might be at risk, and steps that they can take to safeguard their children. While it is important that parents be proactive regarding their children's use of the Internet, it also is important that parents not overreact to potential threats. Instead, parents need to take a proactive approach toward protecting their children in a technology-rich environment.

Internet Use by Children

In 2004, a study examining Internet use by children found that 98 percent of children ages 9 to 19 used the Internet weekly. Among those Internet users, 92 percent reported accessing it at school, 75 percent reported using it at home and 64 percent reported using it in another location. The same research study found that 36 percent of the children who use the Internet weekly reported that they had not received any instructions regarding how to use it safely. Additionally, 40 percent of the children admitted to having chatroom conversations that were sexual in nature. Children reported that they also were sharing personal information such as their names and addresses with people they had met online. Alarmingly, children also reported that they perceived these online friends to be close and more accepting of their true selves than those friends they knew in person.

Signs of Risky Online Behavior

According to research conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigations and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the following are some signs that a child might be at risk online:

- Your child spends large amounts of time online, especially at night.
- You find pornography on your child's computer.

- Your child receives phone calls from men you don't know or is making calls, sometimes long distance, to numbers you don't recognize.
- Your child receives mail, gifts, or packages from someone you don't know.
- Your child turns the computer monitor off or quickly changes the screen on the monitor when you come into the room.
- Your child becomes withdrawn from the family.
- Your child is using an online account belonging to someone else.

Steps for Parents

- Communicate with your child. Have a conversation with your child about Internet safety beforehand and keep the lines of communication open.
- Determine what your child is doing online. Discuss with your child what sites are being looked at and whether social networking sites are being used.
- Supervise Internet friends. Parents should become acquainted with their child's online friends much like they would with friends walking into their homes. Additionally, parents should discuss with their child the dangers of meeting Internet friends offline. If a child is planning to meet an Internet friend in person, the meeting should take place in a public location and a trusted adult, predetermined by the parent, should be with the child during the meeting.
- Establish unrevealing screen names. Screen names, or aliases, frequently are used when communicating online. When determining screen names, parents should actively help make sure that screen names do not use suggestive language or personal information. Make sure your child's screen name doesn't reveal personal information, such as name, age, hometown, or school. Pick a name that is anonymous.
- Monitor online activity. Parents should periodically review the history of online activities. Additionally,

parents should consider setting their browser security to high to reduce the potential exposure to pornography or other inappropriate materials.

- Place computers in a central location. Parents should only allow Internet access on computers that are in a central location of the home, such as a living room. Avoid allowing Internet access in secluded areas of the home, such as a child's bedroom.

- Parents should assist children in establishing secure passwords. Secure passwords include combinations of characters, numbers, and letters as well as upper and lowercase letters. As a part of establishing secure passwords, tell children that passwords are not to be shared with anyone except their parents. Explain the financial and personal dangers of sharing passwords.

- Restrict access to social networking sites. If it's determined that a child will have access to social networking sites, parents should insist that social networking sites not be public. For safety, the site should have restricted access to only a select group of people such as family and close friends. Make sure the people in the restricted access group maintain the privacy of the site.

- Use filtering software. Install filter and blocking software such as Netnanny (*http://www.netnanny.com*) and Cyberpatrol (*http://cyberpatrol.com*). While these may not block all objectionable materials, they do help to reduce them.

- Post only information that both the child and parent would be comfortable seeing online. Help the child realize that many people can see the site, including teachers, police, the college they may try to apply to, and potential employers.

- Model online respect. Parents should model appropriate online behavior as well as discuss with their children that foul language or name calling is intolerable.

- Set up a family Internet use contract. Parents and children should discuss age-appropriate Internet activities and what the family policy is for Internet use both within and outside of the household. By setting up a family Internet use contract, parents and children can discuss the potential hazards of online materials and establish what the expectations are for children's conduct and behavior online. Examples of contracts can be found at *http://www.netsmartz.org/*, *http://safekids.com* and *http://www.isafe.org/*.

- Maintain lines of communication. Make sure that your child knows that you will listen calmly to concerns about online activity and respond in a way that is supportive.

Just as parents set safety guidelines for swimming, crossing the street, and buckling seatbelts, parents also need to be vigilant when their children use the Internet. Parents must stay abreast with technology changes and help guard their children's safety online.

References and Resources

CyberSmart provides free student curriculum at *http://www.cybersmartcurriculum.org/*

Dombrowski, S.C., Gischlar, K.L., and Durst, T. (2007) Safeguarding young people from cyber pornography and cyber sexual predation: A major dilemma of the Internet. *Child Abuse Review* 16.

Kaiser Family Foundation (1999). "Kids & Media: The new millennium." Retrieved March 18, 2008, from: *http://www.kff.org/entmedia/1535-index.cfm*

The FBI offers a parent's guide to Internet safety at *http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm*

The Federal Trade Commission provides information about social networking site safety at *http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/tech/tec14.shtm*

The Pew Corporation discusses protecting teens online at *http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/152/report_display.asp*

The Polly Klaas Foundation discusses Internet safety at *http://www.pollyklaas.org/internet-safety/pkfsummary.pdf*

Wired Safety provides Internet safety information and an active support group at *http://www.wiredsafety.org/*

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