

Keeping Kids Safe on the Internet

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February, 2009

Back in my school days, computers were still those clunky boxes with the blinking green cursor and not much else. By the time I was reaching the end of my college career, e-mail had come along and was increasing in popularity. I think I first surfed the 'net around 1997. Now that I've dated myself, I might as well come clean: seven-year-olds regularly educate me on computers and the intricacies of diverting and reversing computer crises. As with all technological advances, the existence of the internet has brought great benefits as well as added concerns. The importance of internet safety became increasingly clear to me as I have pursued my career with young people and families over the past several years. The point was driven home when one of the young people I worked with in the past was actually stalked via the web. Nowadays, I add safe internet practices to the age old lectures involving "stranger danger," good touch – bad touch, and other essential safety discussions. Unfortunately, this is one area in which the generation gap can really work against us adults.

Many parents and grandparents have only recently learned to use computers and navigate their way around the internet. Because internet safety was not an issue even 15 or so years ago, it is extremely important that caretakers of today's youth educate themselves and then educate the young ones in their care. Since predators on the internet are just as wily and persuasive as other types of predators, it also may be necessary for adults to regularly monitor the internet exploits of their children. What may seem harmless, flattering, or a great opportunity to some young people may actually look a little questionable to more experienced adults. Some tips to assist maintaining safe internet boundaries in your family follow:

- Just as with conversations about drugs, sex, smoking, drinking, etc., don't assume that your child is not vulnerable to the problem of internet danger. Initiate conversations and keep the discussion

going even if your youth does not have access to the internet in your home. Ask if they've learned about internet safety at school, and listen to what they already know.

- Create and enforce the internet safety rule of NEVER giving out any personal information over the internet. This includes age, name, school, address, phone number, credit card, school ID #, etc.
- Teach your adolescents not to be swayed by tempting offers made to them over the internet. For instance, internet predators may request pictures or meetings for potential modeling jobs. Personally, I stick to the rule "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is."
- Always avoid sharing descriptive information online with friends. For example, communications that include future plans, meeting locations and the like can put the communicators in danger. On the internet, you never know who could be "eavesdropping."
- Be cautious of information you post in areas that can be accessed by anyone who uses the internet, even if it is password protected. You may think that your friends are the only ones to access your postings, but this is not the case. Using your real name (instead of a fake screen name), posting your picture and providing other personal information (see tip 2 above) can be a dangerous mistake. If you wouldn't post this information on an actual billboard in a public place, you should not post it on any space on the internet either.

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