

Internet Safety

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The internet has allowed many wonderful things to occur for our children, access to information, cultural exchange, learning and communication. Used with care, it can be a wonderful tool, but like other experiences for our children, it is not without risks. We need to balance the risks and benefits with open communication and some simple common sense.

There are three major types of risk to children online. 1. Exposure to material that depicts violence or explicit sex. 2. Pedophiles (adults sexually attracted to children) who lure children. 3. Threatening or abusive messages in electronic mail or bulletin boards. Teenagers are often at greater risk, because their computer use is often unsupervised. Here is a list of some things parents can do. Additional resources are available ironically enough, at our website, www.dollandassociates.com .

- Tell your children to never give out personal information online (name, address, phone number, age, school name and marital status).
- Talk openly about the risks and benefits of the Internet with your children. Be balanced or you will lose credibility. Keep talking about their experiences and interests and share yours with them.
- Surf the net together.
- Keep the computer in a common room in the home where anyone can easily see the screen.
- Monitor the amount of time your children spend online. Your online service can help you with this.
- Choose an online service or software that blocks out unwanted content. For example, there is Net Nanny or SurfWatch, but understand that there is no substitution for supervision. The computer is not a babysitter. Remember that blocked sites need to be updated, and many children are more computer savvy than us adults.
- Tell your children you must know in advance about any face-to-face meeting arranged online. Require any meeting to be in public with you or another trusted adult along.
- Tell them that they must get your approval before posting or sending any pictures.
- Discuss how public the internet is, and that just like at work where the company owns your computer, the computer at home is open for you to investigate and monitor.
- Checking the History, what sites on the net were visited, can be informative but too late. Explain the safety reasons for your monitoring their e-mail and internet use.
- All passwords are to be shared with you and never with anyone online.
- Talk with them about how and what they may be told online may not be true, teach them to be good consumers of information and question the sources of that information.

- Monitor Chat Rooms and e-mail yourself and make a rule about only using monitored chat rooms.
- Find out about computer safeguards used at school, the public library and at the homes of your children's friends.
- Have your children tell you about any information that makes them feel uncomfortable and report any threatening behavior or abusive material involving children to your online service immediately. You may also call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1-800-843-5678. They also have Child Safety on the Information Highway and Teen Safety on the Information Highway pamphlets.

The following is a list of warning signs that your child may be inappropriately using the internet taken from A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety (www.fbi.gov):

- Excessive online use, especially late at night.
- Spending unsupervised time in an unmoderated chat room.
- Lots of graphic files being downloaded.
- Receiving phone calls, letters, gifts, or packages from strangers or making calls to numbers you do not recognize.
- Turning off the monitor quickly or changing the screen when you come into the room.
- Using an on-line account that belongs to someone else.
- Having face-to-face meetings with unfamiliar people without reasonable explanation of where they met.

Protection from threatening and abusive messages in e-mails and chat rooms

- Tell children not to respond to any messages that are mean, threatening, or otherwise make them feel uncomfortable. Let them know that it is not their fault if they get a message like that. Tell them that the correct way to handle such messages is to tell parents about them right away so that parents can contact the service provider.
- Discuss how public the internet is, and that, just like at work where the company owns your computer, the computer at home is open for you to investigate and monitor.
- Consistently monitor Chat Rooms and e-mail, and make a rule about only using monitored chat rooms.
- Get to know your child's "online friends" just as you try get to know his or her other friends.
- Talk with them about how and what they may be told online may not be true, teach them to be good consumers of information and question the sources of that information.
- All passwords are to be shared with you and never with anyone online.
- Checking the History, what sites on the net were visited, can be informative but too late. Explain the safety reasons for your monitoring their e-mail and internet use.

Protection from on-line predators

- Tell your children to never give out personal information online (name, address, phone number, age, school name and marital status).
- Make sure your children don't turn to chat rooms for someone who will listen to them and their concerns. This gives pedophiles an opportunity to establish a relationship with their young victims by coming across as empathic and understanding. Instead, put your child in touch with responsible adults (family members, neighbors, friends, teachers, coaches, counselors, clergy) they can confide in when they are upset with you.
- Tell your children you must know in advance about any face-to-face meeting arranged online. Require any meeting to be in public with you or another trusted adult along.
- Tell them that they must get your approval before posting or sending any pictures.
- Have your children tell you about any information that makes them feel uncomfortable and report any threatening behavior or abusive material involving children to your online service immediately. You may also call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1-800-843-5678. They also have two excellent brochures, *Child Safety on the Information Highway* (available at: www.safekids.com/child_safety.htm) and *Teen Safety on the Information Highway* (available at: www.safekids.com/safeteens/safeteens.htm)

According to the FBI, if you suspect your child is in communication with a sexual predator online, talk openly about your suspicions and tell them about the dangers of computer-sex offenders. Review what is on the computer. Use caller ID to determine who is calling your child and monitor all types of communication. If any of these situations arise in your home via the Internet or on-line service, contact your local or state law enforcement agency, the FBI, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children:

1. Your child or anyone in the home received child pornography.
2. Someone who knows your child is under 18 has sexually solicited your child.
3. Your child has received sexually explicit images from someone that knows your child is under the age of 18.

If one of these scenarios occurs, keep the computer turned off in order to preserve any evidence, and unless directed by the law, do not attempt to copy any text or images.

Remember that children are by their nature curious about their world. That is a good thing. While we cannot protect our children all the time, with supervision, guidance and open communication their exploration of the world can be safer. Teenagers may use the internet to explore their world, to find relationships and experiences outside of their family. They are naturally curious about sexuality and sexually explicit material. Be a resource of information to your child. Be active in their online and off line life. If you do not know how to respond to a question or situation, seek out additional information.