Traveling Safely on the Internet

Like most parents, you probably have rules for how your children should deal with strangers, which TV shows, movies, and videos they're allowed to watch, what stores they're allowed to enter, and where and how far from home they're allowed to travel. It's important to make similar rules for your children's Internet use and to be aware of their online activities.

You'll also want to make sure that surfing the Net doesn't take the place of homework, social activities, or other important interests. You might even set an alarm clock or timer if you or your child tend to lose track of time. The following are tips for ensuring that your children have safe, productive, and enjoyable experiences on the Internet.

Interacting with Others on the Internet

Just as we tell our children to be wary of strangers they meet, we need to tell them to be wary of strangers on the Internet. Most people behave reasonably and decently online, but some are rude, mean, or even criminal. Teach your children that they should:

Never give out personal information (including their name, home address, phone number, age, race, family income, school name or location, or friends' names) or use a credit card online without your permission.

Never share their password, even with friends.

Never arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they meet online unless you approve of the meeting and go with them to a public place.

Never respond to messages that make them feel confused or uncomfortable. They should ignore the sender, end the communication, and tell you or another trusted adult right away.

Never use bad language or send mean messages online.

Also, make sure your children know that people they meet online are not always who they say they are and that online information is not necessarily private.

Limiting Appropriate Content on the Internet

Even without trying, your children can come across materials on the Internet that are obscene, pornographic, violent, hate filled, racist, or offensive in other ways. One type of material —child pornography— is illegal. You should report it to the Center for Missing and Exploited Children by calling 1-800-THE LOST (843-5678) or going to http://www.missingkids.org/ . While other offensive material is not illegal, there are steps you can take to keep it away from your children and out of your home.

Make sure your children understand what you consider appropriate for them. What kinds of sites are they welcome to visit? What areas are off limits? How much time can they spend, and when? How much money, if any, can they spend? Set out clear, reasonable rules and consequences for breaking them.

Make online exploration a family activity. Put the computer in the living room or family room. This arrangement involves everyone and helps you monitor what your children are doing.

Pay attention to games your older child might download or copy. Some are violent or contain sexual content.

Look into software or online services that filter out offensive materials and sites. Options include stand alone software that can be installed on your computer, and devices that label or filter content directly on the web. In addition, many Internet Service Providers and commercial online services offer site blocking, restrictions on incoming e-mail, and children's accounts that access specific services. Often, these controls are available at no additional cost. Be aware, however, children are often smart enough to get around these restrictions. Nothing can replace your supervision and involvement.

Find out what the Internet use policy is at your local library.

Ask about the Internet use policy at your child's school.

Encouraging Information Literacy

Show your children how to use and evaluate information they find on the Internet. Not all online information is reliable. Some individuals and organizations are very careful about the accuracy of the information they post, but others are not. Some even mislead on purpose. Remind your children not to copy online information and claim it's their own or copy software unless it is clearly labeled as free.

Help children understand the nature of commercial information, advertising, and marketing, including who created it and why it exists. Encourage them to think about why something is provided and appears in a specific way. Steer your children to noncommercial sites and other places that don't sell products specifically to children. It is important to be aware of the potential risks involved in going online, but it is also important to keep them in perspective. Common sense and clear guidelines are the place to start.

Article adapted from Parent's Guide to the Internet:

http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/internet/tips.html