

Internet Safety for Teens

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When we first got Internet access in our home in 1994, our teenaged children were the first people to use it. My husband, Ed, was sure that there was nothing there to interest him until our son Arend showed his father how to find that day's soccer scores for his favorite team in the Netherlands.

Our daughter Chantal showed me a chat-group for teens. "Ah," she said indignantly, "Someone is being rude. I'll just tell him!"

Speaking up just as she would in a face-to-face conversation, Chantal typed in, "That's sexist. Stop it!"

Immediately, a request came to our e-mail address from a different chat room user thanking Chantal for saying something and asking for a private conversation. I felt a little nervous. "You can say hello but don't give any personal information," I advised. We didn't realize that, by signing her note in the chat room with her unusual name, Chantal had already given out personal information!

When Chantal replied, the person wrote back with some crude explicit sexual language. Chantal disconnected and went to a different Web site. Within a few minutes of my daughter visiting what seemed to be an innocent place with me standing right next to her, explicit pornographic pictures started popping up onto our computer screen!

The Internet is a tremendous resource for gathering information, for sharing resources, and for finding people who are interested in the same things you are. Much more protection is available than existed when the Internet first became popular, but adults still need to be vigilant. Children and youth can be exposed to pornography, solicited, and seduced by molesters pretending to be friends, bullied by other youth, and tricked into putting private information into a public arena where it might be misused.

Cyber-predators are a growing threat for children and youth. Experts estimate that, in the United States alone, between 75 percent to 90 percent of teenagers now use the Internet. Research done by the University of New Hampshire in 2004 found that one in five children between the ages of ten and seventeen received a sexual solicitation over the Internet. One child in 33 received an aggressive solicitation – someone who asked to meet her/him somewhere, called on the phone, or sent money, gifts, and letters by regular mail.

If you type a name into the Internet, it may well lead you to a young person's profile online if she or he is listed in a "friend" community such as MySpace and Facebook. A typical profile of a teen girl or young woman might show you or anyone else who wants to know:

- Her name;
- Photos of her and her friends;
- The names and photos of other family members including children; and
- Where she works, goes to school, or hangs out.

Many of the contacts on a teen chat line or an online "friends" Web site are men who are prowling the Internet to gain access to young people.

Pornographic Web sites with extremely explicit pictures, animations, and videos of every kind of sexual activity imaginable – and some that are hard to imagine can be accessed by a few clicks of the mouse. If anyone enters your e-mail address in a registration box on these sites, you might start receiving e-mail with sexual pictures in it. The more ethical Web sites will at least ask if the viewer is over eighteen.

However, there are pornographic Web sites that have deliberately taken names of places that sound very innocent or credible with the intention of fooling children. Having children be online is like letting them have interactive access to millions of strangers. This can be wonderful, as long as everyone in the home follows the following safety rules.

- First of all, law enforcement experts strongly recommend keeping your computer in the living room rather than in a child's bedroom so that adults can monitor what's going on. Taking the time to see what children are doing is the best way to prevent problems.
- Make sure that children understand reality. Using a computer gives a false illusion of privacy and connection. It is hard to remember at all times that you really do not know who a person is that you are communicating with through the Internet. Ask your young people, "Would you hand out flyers with your personal information to strangers walking down the street? Then remember that the Internet is no different than the street – these are still strangers in a public area. In fact, because you can't see them, you have even less information about who they might be on the Internet than you do in person."
- Young people need to be aware that, even if they know someone, they cannot control what that person might do with any information given through the Internet. Tell them, "Once you put something on the Internet, it is available for the world to see. No matter what guarantees are made, it is a mistake to post anything on the Internet that you would not want your parents, teachers, other friends, neighbors, or employers to see."
- Have clear rules and consequences. Be firm about the fact that computer access is a privilege, not a right. A logical consequence for breaking a rule might be the loss of computer use for a few days except for doing homework. Young people might not always follow your rules, but you should be clear on what your expectations are.
- Young people are safest if their adults know *what* they are doing, *where* they are going, and *who* they are with so their job is to *check first* before changing the plan about Internet use.

- Tell children and youth that their rule is to check with you first before they put *any* personal information on the Internet by filling out a survey, registering on a Web site, joining a chat group, etc. Personal information includes their photos, where they live, where they go to school, their name, their telephone number, your name, your place of work, the names of their friends or family or teacher, sports team, neighbors, city, or school.
- Be explicit that you expect children and youth to get your permission *before* they accept gifts from, have a telephone conversation with, or make a plan to meet someone they don't already know well, whether they learned about that person through the Internet or anywhere else.
- It can be hard to say "No" to an interesting friendly person who requests personal information. You can practice this skill by pretending to be a stranger who is initiating an e-mail conversation. To keep trust, tell children from the beginning who you really are and remind them that this is for practicing skills. Make a game of trying to trick the child into giving you personal information so that she or he can say, "Sorry. I don't give personal information on the Internet." The child can also just end the conversation by disconnecting. You could also pretend to be an acquaintance at school who is requesting that the child sends a photo or shares other private information.
- Turn the tables and let the child try to trick *you* into giving personal information or into sharing something that would be embarrassing if it fell into the wrong hands. This practice does *not* need to be scary or creepy. It is a way to show how each one of you could say anything (pretend to be a child or an adult, to live in the same town, to like the same type of things, etc.) and the other person wouldn't know if you were telling the truth or not.
- If children resist practicing, tell them that their ability to demonstrate safety skills on the computer is required before you will have enough peace of mind to allow them on the Internet.
- In order to protect children from exposure to sexual images and language, tell children clearly that, the second that someone starts to initiate sexual or threatening talk or that a Web site starts to show something sexual or graphically violent, children need to stop the contact and let you know. You can tell a younger child, "If you read or see something that looks weird, strange, or scary, get off the computer and tell me." To make young people less of a target when they are exploring the Internet, make sure they use e-mail addresses that do not have their or your name as part of the address.
- To prevent computer problems, have a rule that young people are to check with you before opening or replying to any kind of spam and before opening any kind of attachments. Our experts recommend that spam you don't want should just be deleted. Even if you ask to be unsubscribed, some unethical places will send your address to several other places just because you responded.
- Ask your Internet provider about their resources for screening tools to restrict access to inappropriate language/sites for children. There are also software programs that can tell you what websites someone using the computer has visited and other programs that can screen for pornography. However, these are quickly out of date and sometimes stop access to or from many legitimate Web sites and e-mail addresses. In any case, a curious computer-savvy child will probably be able to figure out how to disable or work around whatever screening or monitoring devices you put into place.
- Ask your Internet provider how you should report a person on the Internet who seems potentially dangerous.
- Ask your legislators to support groups that want to take balanced action in making the Internet a safer

place for young people. According the KidsHealth.org, a wonderful Web site funded by the Nemour's Foundation, "The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires Web sites to explain their privacy policies on the site and get parents' consent before collecting or using a child's personal information, such as a name, address, phone number, or social security number. The law also prohibits a site from requiring a child to provide more personal information than necessary to play a game or participate in a contest."

- Finally, the best way to help young people be safe on the Internet is also the best way to help protect them from other dangers – no matter how busy or stressed you are, be a positive person who makes time to talk. You want children to tell you what they are doing and to ask you about anything that seems confusing or odd to them. Notice when they act stressed, withdrawn, or secretive. Make the time to *listen* and *pay attention* to the children in your life.