

## INTERNET SAFETY

### *Putting the Issue in Perspective*

There have been some highly publicized cases of exploitation involving the internet, but that doesn't mean every child will experience major problems. The vast majority of people who use the internet do not get into serious trouble. Many people, including children, have been confronted with disturbing or inappropriate material. There are steps parents and guardians can take to try to shield their children from such material, but it's almost impossible to completely avoid all inappropriate material. Sadly there are some cases where children have been victimized by serious crime as a result of going online. Families can greatly minimize the chances their children will be victimized by teaching children to follow some safety rules. The fact that crimes are being committed online, however, is not a reason to avoid using these services. To tell children to stop using the internet would be like telling them to forgo attending school because students are sometimes victimized or bullied there. A better strategy would be to instruct children about both the benefits and dangers of "cyberspace" and for them to learn how to be "street smart" in order to better safeguard themselves in any potentially dangerous situation.

### *What Are The Risks?*

There are a few risks for children who use the internet or other online services. Teenagers are particularly at risk because they often go online unsupervised and are more likely than younger children to participate in online discussions regarding companionship, relationships, or sexual activity. If you have a teen in your family or you are a teenager, check *Teen Safety on the Information Highway* at the "More Publications" link of [www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com) or order a free copy by calling 1-800-843-5678. Some specific risks include

- **Exposure to inappropriate material.** Your child may be exposed to inappropriate material considered to be sexual, hateful, or violent in nature or material encouraging dangerous or illegal activities. Children could seek out such material but may also come across it on the web via chat areas, E-mail, or even instant messaging if they're not looking for it.
- **Physical molestation.** Your child might provide information or arrange an encounter possibly risking his or her safety or the safety of other family members. In some case child molesters have used chat areas, e-mail and instant messages to gain a child's confidence and then arrange a face to face meeting.
- **Harassment and bullying.** Your child might encounter messages via chat, e-mail or their cellular telephones that are belligerent, demeaning, or harassing. "Bullies", typically other young people, often use the internet to bother their victims.
- **Viruses and hackers.** Your child could download a file containing a virus that could damage the computer or increase the risk of a "hacker" gaining remote access to the computer. This could jeopardize your family's privacy and safety.
- **Legal and financial.** Your child could do something that has negative legal or financial consequences such as giving out a family member's credit card number or doing something violating another person's rights. Legal issues aside, children

should be taught good “netiquette” which means to avoid being inconsiderate, mean or rude on the internet.

### *Guidelines for Parents or Guardians*

By taking responsibility for your children’s online computer use, parents or guardians can greatly minimize any potential risks of being online. Make it a family rule to

- Never give out identifying information – home address, school name or telephone number – in a public message such as chat or newsgroups, and be sure you’re dealing with someone both you and your children know and trust before giving out this information via e-mail. Think carefully before revealing any personal information such as age, financial information, or marital status. Do not post photographs of your children in newsgroups or on websites available to the public. Consider using a pseudonym, avoid listing your child’s name and e-mail address in any public directories and profiles and find out about your ISP’s privacy policies and exercise your options for how your personal information may be used.
- Get to know the internet and any services your child uses. If you don’t know how to log on, get your child to show you. Have your child show you what he or she does online and become familiar with all the activities available online. Find out if your children have a free web based, e-mail account such as those offered by some ISPs. If so, learn their user names and passwords on those accounts. Also learn the places, such as school and the library where they can access those accounts.
- Never allow your child to arrange a face to face meeting with someone they first “meet” on the internet without an adult family member’s permission. If a meeting is arranged, make the first one in a public place and be sure to accompany your child.
- Never respond to messages that are suggestive; are obscene; are belligerent; are threatening; or make you feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused. Encourage your children to tell you if they encounter such messages. If you or your child receives a message that is harassing, of a sexual nature or threatening, forward a copy of the message to your ISP and ask for their assistance. Instruct your child not to click on any links contained in e-mails from persons they don’t know. Such links could lead to sexually explicit or otherwise inappropriate web sites or could be a computer virus. If someone sends you or your children messages or images that are indelicate, lewd or obscene with the intent to abuse, annoy, harass, or threaten you, or if you become aware of the transmission, use or viewing of pornographic images of children while online, immediately report this to the police.
- Remember people online may not be who they seem. Because you can’t see or even hear the person, it would be easy for someone to misrepresent him or herself. Thus someone indicating “she” is a “12 year old girl” could in reality be a 40 year old man.
- Remember everything you read online may not be true. Any offer that’s “too good to be true” probably is. Be careful about any offers involving you going to a

- meeting, having someone visit your home or sending money or credit card information.
- Set reasonable rules and guidelines for computer use by your children. See “My Rules for Online Safety” below. Discuss them with your children and post them near the computer as a reminder. Remember to monitor your children’s compliance with these rules, especially when it comes to the amount of time your children spend on the computer. A child’s excessive use of online services or the internet, especially late at night, may be a clue there is a potential problem. Remember personal computers and online services should not be used as electronic babysitters.
  - Check out blocking, filtering and ratings applications to see if they will be of assistance to your family.

Be sure to make this a family activity. Consider keeping the computer in a family room rather than the child’s bedroom. Get to know their “online friends” just as you get to know all of their other friends. If your child has a cellular telephone, talk with him or her about using it safely. The same rules that apply to computer use also apply to the use of cellular telephones.

## **MY RULES FOR ONLINE SAFETY**

- I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parents' or guardians' work address/telephone number, or the name and location of my school without my parents' or guardians' permission. I will not give out my internet password(s) to anyone – even my best friends – other than my parents or guardians.
- I will tell my parents or guardians right away if I come across any information that makes me feel scared uncomfortable or confused.
- I will never agree to get together with someone I first “meet” online without checking with my parents or guardians. If they agree to the meeting, I will be sure it is in a public place and bring my parent or guardian along.
- I will never send a person my picture or anything else without first checking with my parents or guardians.
- I will not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel scared, uncomfortable or confused. It is not my fault if I get a message like that. If I do, I will tell a trusted adult right away so they can contact the online service.
- I will talk with my parents or guardians so we can set up rules for going online. We will decide upon the time of day I can be online, the length of time I can be online, and appropriate areas for me to visit. I will not access other areas or break these rules without their permission.
- I will practice good “netiquette” by not hurting other people or breaking the law.

*Information Provided by the National Center of Missing & Exploited Children,  
Alexandria, VA.*