

Internet safety tips for parents



The internet is a source of concern for many parents. Media scare stories abound. And it doesn't help that our kids often know more about the internet than we do!

As with anything, the internet has both positive and negative aspects. While there are several things every parent needs to consider about their kids growing up in a virtual world, it's also good to recognise the internet as an unparalleled source of information, education, and relaxation. In the following pages, *Support Net* will hopefully give you some practical advice, and help you find out more about life in the virtual world.

Safety Tip

Make sure your children always ask you before they download anything from the web, especially if it's from a website they've never used before. 'Free' things like 'smiley faces' or screensavers may include hard-to-detect viruses.

Keeping your kids safe

Huge growth areas on the internet in the past couple of years are 'networking sites' such as MySpace, Bebo, Teenspot and the rapidly expanding Facebook. These sites make keeping in touch with friends very easy – although 'friends' can include friends of friends or people your child has met at an event, like a summer camp.



How networking sites work

Essentially all networking sites operate along the same lines: you register with your name, address, e-mail and phone number and then fill in a personal profile which will cover things like your favourite music, bands, films and other interests. All this appears on your own web page.

Some sites allow you to design your page in your own style. You can usually also upload photos, 'post' links to other websites and send messages to your friends. Most sites give you the option to keep your profile information secret except for your approved friends, although you have to choose to do this.

The popularity of networking sites means your children are probably going to want to establish their own profile on at least one of them. If you're concerned about this, then set a few ground rules –

1. Make sure they only let 'friends' they actually know see their profile. You may need to explain to your child that, online, not everyone is who they claim to be.
2. Agree what kind of pictures they can put online, especially if they have a camera on their mobile phone or their own digital camera.
3. Ensure they know that any 'rules' you've agreed on for internet use (time allowed on, etc.) apply to networking sites too.

Inappropriate contact

Occasionally in the media, you read stories about how networking sites, 'instant messaging', and chat rooms may put children at risk. The vast majority of the time this isn't the case, but there have been a few high profile cases where children and young teenagers have 'met' people online, and then arranged to meet in the real world, with serious consequences.

As a parent there are several things you can do to prevent situations like this:

- Be aware of who your kids are talking to online
- Explain sensitively that people might not be who they say they are online
- Encourage them to use sites which require all users to register
- Make sure your child doesn't use a web-cam (camera linked to the computer) without you or another responsible adult present
- Tell your child never to send photos of themselves to someone they don't know, and never to open files or photos sent from someone they've only met online
- Make your kids aware of the CHAT points listed below – perhaps cut out the section and pin it up somewhere near the computer

CHAT: simple safety steps for chat rooms

- C Careful** - people online may not be who they say they are.
- H Hang onto your personal information** never give out your e-mail or home address, phone number or where you go to school.
- A Arranging to meet could be dangerous** never meet someone offline unless you are sure who they are, and then only in a public place, with a parent/carer.
- T Tell your friends** or an adult if you come across something that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Adapted from www.care.org.uk/anon

Inappropriate content

It's a simple fact that there are more pornography sites on the internet than sites dedicated to any other topic. 'Sex' is the word most searched for on Google and 10% of the money spent online is spent on pornography¹. Apparently, a third of British internet users access pornography websites regularly². With such demand, it's no wonder pornography has proliferated on the web.

Naturally, many parents want to prevent their children accessing pornographic material, and, in fact, it can be quite easy to make sure nobody can access porn from your computer. There are several pieces of software which will help prevent porn websites appearing in online searches. One key rule is to make sure you use the filters on your search engines, so for example, on Google, make sure the 'Safe Search' feature is on.

If you have a 'wireless router' (which gives you internet access anywhere in the house) you will usually have a 'firewall' to prevent unsolicited emails etc. You can usually block access to particular websites or 'key words' by entering them into the router, where they can't be switched off by your children. If you're not entirely sure how to do this, ask a computer-savvy friend to show you.

Alternatively, you can switch to an internet service provider which monitors content and prevents access to pornography. Service providers like *xalt.co.uk* do this.

But the best way to make sure your kids aren't visiting pornography websites is to keep an eye on them. It is strongly recommended to keep your computer in a public place in the house – a downstairs

Safety Tip

Watch out for bogus competitions. Filling in your details on a website might mean you get a lot of junk emails (spam) and you don't know if your details will be sold to someone else.

room is preferable – and with the screen facing outward into the room. You can also check the 'Internet History' regularly to see which sites have been visited. Look at the 'minimised' windows at the bottom of the screen to see what else your child is looking at besides the main page on-screen at the moment.

Talking to your kids will help too. It is entirely possible for a seemingly innocent-looking website to be a front for pornographic material. Encourage your children to tell you if they accidentally access inappropriate content, or if 'pop up' windows appear with dubious material.

Also, be aware that as your children grow up they will naturally develop a curiosity about sex. If you can develop a relationship where they feel comfortable asking you any question about words they've heard their friends use, they will be less likely to turn to the internet for answers.

1: Forrester business report, cited in 'Does Sex Sell?', Growing Business, May 2006, p.42

2: Study cited in 'Pornography', Mota Vol 1, issue 1 (published by CVM)

Parent's eye view

"My daughter had a problem with [a chat room] and she was talking to people who say they are a kid but really are adults trying to lure kids into friendships and getting them to trust them and then leading them astray either over the net or worst still arranging to meet them somewhere.....and if they use web cameras even worse things can happen."

taken from Pester Power: Families Surviving in the Consumer Society

Parent's eye view

"Be supportive of children who view sites out of curiosity: be understanding of the pressures, but work with them to help them to withstand the temptations. There was a time when my son and I agreed that he would tell me whenever he was on the net, as he had been tempted to view pornography. Just the simple act of keeping him accountable and him promising to let me know what he viewed for a while (and giving me access to his history file) was enough to help him through a difficult period."

"We haven't found the parental control things particularly helpful because they seem to prevent so much genuine use - the kids programmes are much more complex than most of what I use and the parental controls mess up a lot of genuinely okay programmes, by not allowing certain cookies etc."

taken from Pester Power: Families Surviving in the Consumer Society



But what does it all mean?

The internet has spawned its own language and many parents are worried simply because they don't know quite what their kids are talking about. Here are some aspects of the web explained, along with what parents need to be aware of.

What is a 'blog'?

A 'blog' (short for web log) is an online journal where you can write about your interests, what's happening in your life, or a myriad of other things. The most popular 'blogging' site is called Blogger.

Older children and teenagers are more likely to blog. It may be a good idea to set the same rules for blogging as you do for social networking. In addition you might want to dissuade your children from revealing too much personal information, e.g. which school they go to.

It's worth noting that anyone can blog about anything, so if your children are likely to go 'blog-surfing', i.e. reading blogs at random, they may come into contact with material which you may prefer them not to see or read.

"I saw this great video on YouTube"

YouTube is probably the most famous video file-sharing site on the internet. People from all over the world put their videos on there for anyone else to see (through a process called 'uploading'). The vast majority of clips are harmless, but because anyone can post videos, the range of material can include images which you might not want your children to see.

Also, in some cases of 'cyber-bullying', videos showing other children being hit or punched have been placed on YouTube, or sites like it.

To their credit, YouTube administrators do try to remove objectionable content as soon as they are notified of it, but some stuff does sneak through. You may find it helpful to establish a rule that your kids must ask permission before they watch an online video.

Spam

Spam is any form of unwanted email where the sender sends email indiscriminately. While some spam emails contain pornographic images, many more include links to websites offering 'deals' on software or prescription drugs. These sites are usually set up purely to trick you into submitting your credit card details which will then be used fraudulently – this practice is known as 'phishing'.

Generally spam is more of a nuisance than anything else, but sometimes spam

emails can seem very compelling. For example, they may pretend to be from your bank, or from reputable companies, asking for personal details. Make sure your kids know never to reply, especially not with any financial or personal details. No UK business asks for personal details in an email. If it's that important, they'll phone you.

As a general rule it's wise to advise your children never to click on a link in an email they've received from someone they don't know and trust.

Gambling

Online gambling has exploded in recent years, and experts believe internet gamblers are more likely to develop a serious gambling addiction than other gamblers. GamCare, a UK organisation addressing the social impact of gambling, believes that young people are more likely to be at risk from internet gambling websites than from other forms of gambling¹.

Safety Tip

Keep the computer in a public place downstairs, with the screen facing into the room.



Children may be introduced to gambling websites because some of these sites operate free puzzle games and other non-gambling activities. Gambling websites and online casinos are also increasingly advertised – recently several Premiership football clubs have had their shirts sponsored by companies such as *32Red.com* – and take out adverts on many sport-related websites, where they can be accessed by children.

However, the good news is that without access to a credit card or bank details, children are very unlikely to be able to set up an account. However, it is worth making your child aware of the difference between playing a fun game online and trying to win money in an online casino.

Cyber-bullying

It's a sad truth, but most of the harm caused online to children and teenagers is done by people in their own peer group. Cases where children are the subject of a 'hate website' are fortunately very rare, but it has been known to happen. More likely tools for bullies include: abusive emails, comments on instant messaging systems, 'comments' left on blogs or networking profile pages, and possibly unflattering or hurtful videos or photos put on a public website. More than 10% of British teenagers have been the victim of online bullying².

If you suspect your child is being bullied online, there are several things you can do, with your child, to limit the access of the

bullies. For example:

- Change your child's email address.
- Internet service providers have contact email addresses for complaints about email. Forward abusive emails to the sender's ISP and ask them to intervene.
- Avoid chat rooms or message boards where abuse has occurred.
- Limit comments on a blog or network profile to approved users.
- Ask administrators on public websites to remove photos or videos.
- In extreme cases you may wish to inform the police – remember anything written and placed in the public domain which is defamatory comes under laws which deal with libel.

If your child is being bullied, remember to tell them how much you love them and how important you think they are. Bullying is horrible to endure, but there are several organisations which can help. See further information on page 7.

Playing games online

Psychologists studying the impact of violent video games have discovered that such games can 'desensitise' players to real-life brutality. Of course, a child who plays a graphic video game won't automatically become a cold-hearted killer. But there does seem to be substantial evidence that playing video games with elements of

cruelty and violence reduced a person's aversion to real-life depictions of conflict³.

The violence in video games may concern parents, but there are several other aspects to online gaming, which can cause equal worry. Children and young teenagers can become obsessed with online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*. There have been several cases overseas where players have become so absorbed in the games that they have played for days at a time and ended up collapsing with exhaustion.

Some games can also be modified by programmes available online. For example, a 'mod' called 'Hot Coffee' for *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* allowed game-players to take part in a sexually explicit mini-game. Not all 'mods' are bad. For years 'cheats' have existed for games, giving the player unlimited lives or unlimited money.

3 simple steps for parents to take:

- Vet any game bought for the computer, and take notice of the 'age rating' (similar to age rating on films and DVDs).
- Ask your children to show you any 'mods' or 'cheats' they've downloaded.
- Set time limits for playing games.

1: BBC News online, 17 March 2002

2: MSN/YouGov poll, March 2006

3: Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 2006

The good side of the internet?

There is a definite upside to the internet. Certain programmes allow your kids to chat to their friends for free, instead of running up phone bills. Some bands and artists have had their big breaks through people 'discovering' them online. News and sports are covered in great depth and many children rely on the internet when doing their homework.

However, it's useful to talk to your kids about using the internet in the right way, to ensure they make the most of their virtual world experience.

Making sure your kids research the right way

The internet is an unparalleled research facility. There is information on just about anything and everything available



online - but, just like in your local library, some is more useful and some is less useful.

One area of concern to teachers is the growing number of children submitting copied essays. If your child uses the internet for homework research, make sure they aren't just 'cutting and pasting' whole articles or essay answers. Schools are starting to initiate online searches themselves to catch children who are passing off copied essays as their own.

Most commentators on the growth in plagiarism point out that many children don't know that what they're doing is wrong. So make sure your child understands the difference between 'research' and 'copying'.

Credibility

It's worth encouraging your child to use a number of different information sources, and they need to recognise that some are more credible than others. Wikipedia – a very popular online encyclopedia – is an excellent place to start your research, but because it's written by members of the public, it can be biased or misleading.

Encourage your child to be careful about taking advice from websites, and to look for a section explaining who runs the site and their qualification. Some sites, particularly those with teenage forums where anyone can post, can give dangerous advice, even if those

trying to help have good intentions. It's never a good idea to take any medical advice from a website – if your children have reached an age where they don't want to talk to you about health issues, make sure they talk to your GP about anything that's troubling them.

Finally, there are some disturbing websites which promote harmful ideas. These include 'thin-spirational' sites glorifying anorexia, sites which talk about self-harm, and sites which encourage visitors to commit suicide. If you suspect your child is visiting sites like these, you may need to intervene. You can block the sites and you may consider seeking some kind of professional help for your children if they have been regularly visiting the site and it seems to have encouraged self-harming tendencies.

Safety Tip

Check the internet history frequently

Online music

Buying music tracks online (as 'downloads') has revolutionised the music industry. It's now possible for a band to top the charts without selling a single CD. But there are also sites where you can download music without paying – and in most cases this is illegal, although sometimes bands make free songs available.

Always encourage your children to download songs from trusted websites, such as iTunes, and to always check with you first before downloading music files.

Is your child an internet addict?

Parents with children who spend a lot of time online often notice a difference in communication skills, attentiveness at school, and participation in family discussions.

Part of this may be due to the changes caused by puberty. However, an increasing number of psychologists are beginning to describe characteristics which they call 'Internet Addiction'. So, how do you know if your child is addicted to the internet?

Parent's eye view:

"If you even suspect an imbalance of behaviour owing to 'desperation to go on the computer' e.g. rudeness, or lack of active energy - cancel the computer for a month. It is addictive. From your own personal level of understanding, lay down the rules of what you think is a good idea or bad idea, never accept that it's out of your control. Get the children to use a timer with a bell and agree how long each session should be, so they get some practice at self-policing in a very seductive environment."

taken from Pester Power: Families Surviving the Consumer Society

Warning signs

- Compulsive internet use, which they may try to hide from you
- Getting edgy when they can't check email, or their profile on a networking site
- Losing track of time spent online
- Sleeplessness
- Irritability when denied access to the internet

Steps you can take

- As with television, there is only so much stimulation a developing brain can cope with, so 'time outs' are important
- Agree time limits and use a kitchen timer
- Initiate 'internet-free' days - and stick to them yourself!
- Plan family days out from the home
- Encourage them to take part in non-internet activities, especially exercise

10 things you can do to keep your kids safe

- 1 Keep the computer in a family room, with the screen facing into the room. All web surfing can then be seen by the wider family. (You might find this helps adults too!)
- 2 Limit time online to when responsible adults are in the house.
- 3 Switch to an Internet Service Provider that has a family-safe surfing policy, for example, www.xalt.co.uk
- 4 Encourage your children to tell you about inappropriate 'pop-up' advertisements that appear.
- 5 Set up your own Facebook and/or MySpace account and ask your child to register you as a friend.
- 6 Take the time to read their blog – it may help you discover what's really going on with them.
- 7 Set up Microsoft Messenger for your children and their friends. This will limit online contact to people you know. Make sure you approve new 'friends'.
- 8 Web-based email accounts (like Hotmail, Yahoo, etc) are more susceptible to 'spam', so encourage your children to use a folder in your main Outlook Express (or similar) email account. Access Outlook Express and follow the instructions to create a new folder and consider creating a message rule that will divert their emails into their personal folder.
- 9 Adjust the 'Content' setting in your web browser, protecting it with a password. (Open your search engine and, from the Menu bar, follow the instructions to do this. Remember to use a password which would be impossible to guess.)
- 10 Talk to your kids about how not everything on the web is what it appears and make sure they know they can ask you about anything and you won't get cross (this might require a lot of self-control on your part!)

Further information

Websites

General

Kid Smart www.kidsmart.org.uk;
Childnet International
www.childnet-int.org

Help with pornography

Care www.care.org.uk/anon

Technical help

www.getnetwise.org

Internet Service Providers:

www.xalt.co.uk;

Bullying, including online bullying

Childline www.childline.org.uk;
www.bullying.co.uk (has a very good cyberbullying section)

Chat rooms:

www.chatdanger.com

Pester Power

www.careforthefamily.org.uk/pesterpower

Books and booklets

The Parentalk Guide to Your Child and the Internet - Jonathan and Lucy Bartley

Hodder & Stoughton
ISBN: 0340861185 Price: £5.99
Available from bookshops and online
retailers

There are also tips from parents about the internet in **Pester Power: Families Surviving the Consumer Society**, available online at www.careforthefamily.org.uk/pesterpower

Useful addresses

If you want to report material you believe may be illegal, contact Internet Watch Foundation (IWF)
5 Coles Lane, Oakington,
Cambridgeshire, CB4 5BA

Tel: 01223 237700

Fax: 01223 235870/921

E-mail: report@iwf.org.uk
www.internetwatch.org.uk

Safety Tip

If you don't know how to do something technical to protect your kids, ask around until you find someone who does!