

INTERNET SAFETY 101

“Three simple ways to help keep your kids safe online”
by Keri Callahan



Parents know that the educational benefits of the Internet are accompanied by dangers. To help our children excel in school and prepare for their future, the Internet is a necessity. But today's tech-savvy kids need to be both protected and educated when they take off on the Internet—just as they wear a helmet and learn the rules of the road when they venture out on a bike. Three leading Internet-safety organizations—Internet Keep Safe Coalition, NetSmartz Workshop, and i-SAFE—recommend these tips to help keep your children safe online.

1. **COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR KIDS** ~ “Education is the key to prevention. Parents must communicate openly about the potential dangers kids and teens may encounter on the Internet so they are empowered to make responsible decisions when their parents are not around—and so they feel comfortable coming to them if they encounter something inappropriate on the Internet,” says Amber Lindsay, Communications Coordinator for NetSmartz Workshop. “We always encourage parents to discuss three rules with their kids: I will tell an adult I trust if anything makes me feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused; I will ask my parents or guardian before sharing my personal information; and I won't meet in person with anyone I have first 'met' online.” Animated, interactive activities on the NetSmartz website reinforce stranger danger and the potential hazards of giving out personal information such as an address, telephone number, school, or last name.

“i-SAFE's National Assessment Center compiles and evaluates data from parents and students across the country,” says Kevin Storr, i-SAFE's Director of Communications. “We found that 87 percent of parents say they have established rules for their kids' Internet usage, yet more than a third of students say their parents have not established online rules. This shows a digital divide in the communication between parents and their kids, so the first thing we tell parents is: communicate with your family.”

According to iKeepSafe.org, “more than 29 percent of Internet-using children will freely give out their home address and other personal information online, if asked.” Internet predators may lurk online under the guise of other children, and children need to be aware of that. Creating an environment where talking about these issues is the norm makes it more likely that your children will come to you if they have online encounters that make them uncomfortable. Always tell your children to turn off the monitor—but leave the computer on—if someone sends them inappropriate material or comments. That way, when you turn the monitor back on, you can see it and report it.

2. **KNOWLEDGE IS THE BEST DEFENSE** ~ Place all computers in an open, common area of the home. Allowing computers in your children's bedrooms leaves a window for Internet activity you may not see. But no matter where your computers are located, i-SAFE recommends education over filtering devices. “Youth today have access to the Internet at many different locations,” says Storr. “Just because your home has a filter or software doesn't mean the computer your kid is using next door will have a filter or software.”

You should also check your computer's Internet history frequently. This will tell you which websites your children have been visiting. Storr says that according to an i-SAFE survey, “more than a quarter of students are communicating digitally when their parents believe they are asleep.” iKeepSafe.org recommends that your children share their passwords with you, and you should discuss being allowed to check their e-mail accounts. It also suggests that you spend time with your children online and ask them

to show you what their favorite sites are, what they are able to do on the Internet, etc.

“It is important for parents to become educated about the risks online,” says NetSmartz’s Lindsay. “In a study conducted by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, one in five children received a sexual solicitation or approach on the Internet.” Marsali Hancock, President of the Internet Keep Safe Coalition (iKeep- Safe), adds, “Fifty-four percent of teens frequently have private conversations with online strangers through instant messaging, and 30 percent report that they have talked with an online stranger about meeting in person. You see the scope of this problem—it’s truly an epidemic.”

By keeping the lines of communication open in your home, you are more likely to hear from your children if something happens. By keeping the computer in a common area and monitoring its usage, you might actually see it happen.

3. **START NOW** ~ “We feel strongly that the time for children to learn Internet safety is long before they wander into a chartroom. When a child first learns to use a computer, that is the time for the child to also learn the social skills that are unique to connected technology,” says Hancock. “Young, elementary-age children are most likely to believe and internalize a safety message, and as technologies advance, the Internet becomes increasingly available to younger children. By the time children are old enough to type— that’s about four and five years old now—they and their parents need to be fully prepared.”

Related Resources

Cable in the Classroom: Resources and Tools for Parents & Caregivers

www.ciconline.org/parents

Cox Communications: Take Charge!: For Parents: Taking Charge of the Internet!

www.cox.com/takecharge/parents_internet.asp

Disney Online: Surf Swell Island: Adventures in Internet Safety disney.go.com/surfswell

Disney Online Presents CyberNetiquette Comix disney.go.com/cybersafety

Power to Learn: Internet Smarts www.powertolearn.com/internet_smarts

Marsali Hancock, President, Internet Keep Safe Coalition, Arlington, VA

Amber Lindsay, Communications Coordinator, NetSmartz Workshop, Alexandria, VA

Kevin Storr, Director of Communications, i-SAFE Inc., Carlsbad, CA

Reprinted with permission from Cable in the Classroom Magazine, July/August 2006