

Keeping Children Safe on the Internet



The Internet is an amazing tool that provides many wonderful resources. However, children and teens also face potential risks when navigating the web, texting on a cell phone, gaming online, meeting people in a chat room, or posting information on a social networking site.

Sexual Exploitation

Sexual offenders may use the Internet to identify, contact and exploit children and teens. Incidents of offenders exposing children to pornography, enticing them to send pornographic images of themselves, and engaging in sexually explicit chat are all too common. Adults may use the Internet to lure children to meet in person, resulting in tragic consequences.

The risk is real. In a 2010 survey of local school children, 34% of high school students surveyed reported having met someone in person whom they first met on the Internet. An additional 12% of sixth graders surveyed gave the same response. Of course, not all individuals the children met in person were adults with criminal intentions. But the risk is high. People they encounter online are not always who they pretend to be. The 14-year-old “friend” your child chats with through instant messaging may actually be a 40-year-old man.

While children may be targeted by strangers online, it is important to remember that children are most often sexually abused by someone they know and trust, such as a family member or close family friend. Offenders may use computers and cell phones to “groom” the child for abuse by showing them pornography.



Harassment and Bullying

Cyberbullies use instant messaging, text messaging, social networking sites, and other electronic communication to chat or post hurtful or threatening messages online. As children and teens are often reluctant to part with their electronic devices, they may be unable to escape the taunting. Bullying can have devastating and lifelong effects.

Exposure to Inappropriate Material and Illegal Activity

While surfing the web, children may be exposed to inappropriate and/or illegal material. Instructions for making explosives, sites that encourage people to commit suicide, solicitation by hate groups, illegal music and video downloads, and everything in between can be found through the click of a mouse. The exposure may be intentional (the child actually searched for the information) or unintentional as children stumble upon information while searching a very innocent topic.

Special tips for parents:

1. Communication is key. Talk with your children – calmly. While online communication is a common part of teen and preteen social life, many children are unaware of its dangers.
2. Be sure to address online etiquette – encourage your children not to send anything online that they would not say or do in person. Once something is posted online or sent electronically to others, it can never be taken back. Teens should never send provocative photos of themselves to their boyfriend, girlfriend, or anyone else. This is often referred to as “sexting.” In addition, they should never forward or store inappropriate photos they receive from someone else.
3. Make a plan for how they should respond if they receive mean or offensive communication from others: don’t respond to the harasser, save the message and tell a trusted adult.
4. Consider creating Internet safety rules as a family to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to provide input. These rules should include a description of information that is personal and should never be shared online.
5. Be involved. On a regular basis, have your children show you the sites they visit and the people with whom they chat.
Stay informed about safety features for social networking sites and parental controls for electronic devices.
6. Keep computers in public parts of the house, such as the family room, where you can monitor activity. Don’t forget about cell phones, iPads and gaming consoles. Many of them have the same capabilities as a computer. Consider keeping them in a secure area when not in use.
7. Ask questions if your teen is insistent on being online at a certain time, is upset after being online, or if he/she begins receiving gifts or phone calls from someone you don’t know.
8. If you suspect that a child is being abused, immediately contact local law enforcement or the Oregon Department of Human Services (503-378-6704).

There are many wonderful websites for additional information about potential risks, current trends, and tips for keeping children safer online.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children: www.netsmartz.org

Web Wise Kids: www.webwisekids.org

WiredSafety: www.wiredsafety.org

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