

Keeping your Family Safe in the Cyberspace Age



According to the latest census data, more than half of the country's 105 million households have computers. Everyone

from the four-year-old to the 88-year old grandma uses the computer. And, for those people who do not have a computer at home, they have access to one through the office, school or the library.

While computer technology has made our lives easier and provided us with educational and entertainment resources, it has become increasingly important for parents to monitor the websites and "chat rooms" that their children visit online. Keep in mind that anyone in the world can publish material on the web, and much of it is not appropriate for young children or teens — or adults, for that matter!

While some Internet service provider and online services allow parents to limit access to certain parts of the Internet, it is ultimately the parent's responsibility to monitor their children's online activity. In the case of younger children, parents should not allow the Internet to become a babysitting service. And, if your teen spends hour after hour online, that could signal potential problems. Parents should be aware of the websites their children and teens are accessing.

While young children should never be allowed to log on to a "chat room" or bulletin board, parents should visit with their teens and set reasonable guidelines and expectations concerning "chat rooms," since it is primarily teens who are more likely to be the victims of child predators surfing the Internet.

Here are some tips to help guide your teenager through the risks and dangers of the cyberspace highway:

- Discuss with your teens guidelines for computer usage such as the amount of time they can be online and the appropriate websites sites they may visit.
- Encourage your teen to tell you if they receive obscene, harassing or suggestive e-mails and when you become aware of such messages, report them to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline at 800-843-5678 or via the Internet at www.missingkids.com/cybertip.
- Tell your teen to never send a photograph through an e-mail without checking with a parent first.
- Tell your teen to refrain from giving out identifying information such as name, home address, telephone number or school address in a "chat room."
- Never allow your teen to arrange or a face-to-face meeting with another computer user without your permission. If you decide the meeting should take place, be sure to accompany your teen and hold the meeting in a public place. You need to know as much about your child's online friends as you know about their other friends, including their parents.

By knowing the dangers of the Internet, you can take advantage of the positive aspects, minimize the negatives, and make the cyberspace age an enjoyable experience for your family.

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