

# Help Your Children Surf Safely Online

By Bruce A. Love

The Internet has been called the "Information Super Highway." Personal computers serve as on-ramps to this thoroughfare that leads to all kinds of destinations. Highways can be dangerous places though, especially for kids. Just as we do not allow our children to walk, bike, or play on dangerous roads, parents must also take precautions to protect children from hazards on the Internet.

There is no doubt that children can gain valuable skills and knowledge at an early age by becoming familiar with personal computers and developing Internet skills. However, most of us have heard about, or experienced, the dark side of the Internet, and want to protect our children from the destructive images, messages, and lifestyles that are all too accessible online. Pornographic content, Internet gambling, violent virtual reality games, and sexual predators are among the greatest threats that may be encountered while surfing the web.

As an educator at the college level, I observed the destructive effects of several online demons. In some cases, addictions to online gaming and/or pornography threatened the scholastic dreams of a few afflicted students. Exposure to pornographic content at an early age (under 14) has been linked to a much greater predisposition toward sexual deviancies and (for males) developing callous disrespect for women.

While children are often more cyber-savvy than their parents, they are often naïve to the depraved ways of child predators who have historically, searched for victims in places where children gather such as schoolyards, playgrounds, and shopping malls. Today, children gather online, and the Internet provides opportunities for predators to target children for criminal acts with anonymity.

The Internet holds the virtual equivalent of everything that exists in the real world -- the good, the bad, and the ugly. As parents/guardians, we must be vigilant in our efforts to shield children from the evils in the world because our children's innocence is precious, and deserves

protection. By developing, and adhering to some simple Internet guidelines, we can establish a safe, educational, learning environment for our children. Below are several precautions to help parents and guardians protect children from harmful Internet experiences:

1. Place Internet-connected computers in areas that are easily monitored, and never in a child's bedroom.
2. Use an Internet Service Provider (ISP) that offers content filtering. AOL, for example, allows parents to set numerous parameters on E-mail, and Instant Messaging, and also offers the ability to schedule the times and durations of their child's internet privileges. You can even set up AOL to email detailed reports regarding the online activities of your children.
3. Young children should be closely monitored online and use child friendly search engines such as "Ask Jeeves for Kids" (<http://www.ajkids.com>) or "Yahooligans" (<http://yahooligans.yahoo.com>) when doing school projects. Older children can use search engines, such as Google, but parents should make sure that content preference levels are set to use filtering.
4. Instruct your children about the importance of privacy and keeping passwords and identity secret.
5. Teach children to tell their parent/guardian if they come across materials that make them feel uncomfortable or threatened.
6. Children must never arrange actual meetings with people they "meet" online.
7. Teach children that predators misrepresent themselves online, and in person, to lure children into dangerous situations.
8. Know your child's friends. Ask them about each of the names in their email address book.
9. Never send pictures, or anything else, without first checking with parents.
10. Develop a set of rules for going online.
11. Teach your children netiquette (a contraction of "network etiquette") so that they learn polite and lawful ways to interact with others online.

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