



Child Safety—The Internet and Television

This guide provides tips and strategies on how to help your child(ren) safely enjoy the benefits of the Internet and television.

Note—The use of the term “your child” throughout this guide does not imply that this digest is for parents only; it is for guardians, grandparents, and other relatives and friends who may also be involved in caring for a child.

The Internet and the World Wide Web

The Internet is a worldwide collection of computer networks that allows people to communicate and share information over computer and telephone lines. The world wide web is a part of the Internet that allows users to move from one document to another by way of links, regardless of where the documents are stored. Unlike other parts of the Internet, the web uses colorful graphics, text, pictures and sometimes sound, animation and video.

Even if you are unfamiliar with the Internet, you can be sure that your child is (or soon will be) using it as the Internet becomes a prominent educational tool for children. The possibilities of the Internet seem endless: Children can access reference materials (online library catalogs, articles—even books), join “chat” groups, play games, discover new parts of the world, communicate with others, get help with homework and more—all online.

Yet, while the Internet is an indispensable learning and research tool, it is also an uncensored and unmonitored medium; because of this, children may inadvertently come across inappropriate material (web sites containing obscene language, pornography, material advocating drug use, chat rooms intended for adult audiences, etc.). In rare instances, the Internet has even played a role in the exploitation and abduction of children.

Julia recently purchased a computer for her 11-year-old son, Brian, and wants to know how to protect him from accessing inappropriate Internet sites. “Brian spends hours surfing the Web,” Julia explains. “How can I be sure he isn’t accessing dangerous or adult material?”

This information, however, is not intended to scare or deter you or your child from using the Internet. The Internet is safe if used properly, but just as you should protect your family from everyday dangers in the world, you should also protect your family from potential dangers on the Internet. By taking simple precautions, such as monitoring your child’s use of the Internet and teaching online safety skills, you can help your child reap the benefits of the Internet while protecting him or her from potential hazards.

Promoting Online Safety

The best way to keep your child safe is to take simple precautions and to educate yourself and your child about Internet safety. The following tips should serve as a guideline for establishing Internet safety rules in your family.

Did you know...?

By the year 2003, 22 million children, ages 12 and under, and 12 million teens are projected to be online.

—The Children’s Partnership



Online Safety Tips

- Discuss Internet safety with your child. Explain that, while the Internet is an entertaining learning tool, some users may not have the best intentions—and some material is not appropriate for children.
- Consider keeping the computer in a family room or other common area so you can monitor your child's Internet use.
- Set limits on the amount of time your child can spend on the Internet—including different limits for time spent on academic research and time spent surfing, playing games, chatting, etc.
- Frequently review the web sites your child has been visiting to make sure they are appropriate. You can view the list of sites he or she has visited using your web browser's "History" feature.
- Instruct your child to inform you immediately if he or she stumbles upon inappropriate material and to leave the site at once.
- Compile a list of web sites that you have approved, and consider limiting your child's use to only those sites. Use the "Bookmark" feature to keep a list of acceptable sites.
- Establish firm rules for corresponding with strangers via chat rooms or by e-mail. If you (or your child) receive an inappropriate or threatening message, immediately send a copy to your Internet service provider. Your service can often locate the sender and limit or terminate his or her access.
- Consider using one of the filtering/blocking software packages that restrict children's access to inappropriate sites. Please refer to the section on "Internet Filtering/Blocking Programs."
- Make sure your child has a clear understanding of online etiquette. Please refer to the section, "Online Etiquette," below.
- Establish a set of Internet rules and post them next to your computer. Make sure your child understands the reasons behind them and the consequences for violating them. For your convenience, we have provided a sample set of rules at the end of this guide.

Online Etiquette

Along with Internet technology comes online etiquette (or *netiquette*), basic rules of courtesy toward other users. Make sure your child understands and follows these guidelines when using chat rooms, news groups or e-mail to avoid offending others:

- Avoid writing in all capital letters. This can signify shouting and can irritate other Internet users.
- Be polite. Written words can be easily misinterpreted, and teasing or jokes often have a different tone when sent via e-mail.
- Avoid sending large files or chain letters through e-mail. Internet users often receive lots of e-mail and may delete lengthy messages without reading them. If you must send a large file, send it as an attachment.
- When "speaking" to another person in an online chat room, always refer to him or her by name to avoid confusion.
- Keep in mind that your audience may originate from different cultural, religious, ethnic or racial backgrounds. Avoid comments that could offend others.

Teach Your Child to:

- Always ask your permission before giving out personal information (including full name, gender, address, telephone number, Social Security number, credit card number, school name, etc.) or posting photographs (of him or herself, family or friends).
- Tell you immediately if he or she has been asked by someone online to meet in person.
- Inform you if he or she receives any threatening or inappropriate messages or e-mails. Provide your child with examples of what might be considered inappropriate or threatening.
- Ask your permission before loading any sites that charge fees or require personal information.
- Keep his or her password confidential.
- Remember that people online may not be who they seem. Because the other person cannot be seen or heard, it is very easy for someone to misrepresent him or herself. (For instance, a 50-year-old-man could easily pretend to be a 13-year-old girl.)
- Remember that not everything he or she reads online is true or accurate. Anyone can create a web site and post information on it, whether or not the information is legitimate.
- Report to you any online interactions or experiences that make him or her feel uncomfortable.
- Follow established Internet safety rules at home and anywhere else he or she has Internet access. (See suggested rules on the last page of this guide.)

Commonly Used Internet Terminology

bookmark—A saved link to a web site that allows you to click on the link rather than having to retype the address when visiting the site again.

chat room—A location on an online service that allows users to communicate with each other about an agreed-upon topic in “real time” (or “live”), as opposed to delayed time as with e-mail.

download—To copy a file from one computer system to another. From the Internet user’s point of view, to download a file is to request and receive it from another computer (or from a web page on another computer).

e-mail (electronic mail)—A message sent electronically from one computer to another, generally through a modem and telephone line connected to a computer.

search engine—A program that performs keyword searches for information on the Internet.

software—A computer program or set of instructions. System software operates on the machine itself and is invisible to you. Application software allows you to carry out certain activities, such as word processing, games and spreadsheets.

Web browser—A software program that lets you find, see and hear material on the world wide web, including text, graphics, sound and video. Most online services have their own browsers.

Monitoring Your Child's Internet Use

In addition to talking to your child about online safety, one of the best ways to protect your child is to monitor his or her use of the Internet. Although most educators and child psychologists recommend that children under the age of nine surf the web only in the presence of an adult, your child may have access to the Internet when you are not around. Therefore, it is important that you know where and when your child uses the Internet, and what policies are in place for its use.

The Most Likely Places Your Child Might Use the Internet

Schools—Most schools now provide students with access to the Internet. Ask your child's teacher(s), librarian or principal if students are supervised on the Internet, and what filtering or blocking devices (as described in the next section) are used to prevent students from viewing inappropriate material. Most schools ask students to sign an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP), a written contract between the school and the student that outlines rules for Internet use and the student's responsibilities. If your child is asked to sign an AUP, make sure you review it first, and keep a copy for your reference. Note—If your child's school allows children unlimited, unsupervised access to the Internet, you have the right to request that your child not use the service.

Public libraries—Most libraries now offer Internet access. If your local library provides access, find out what policies are in place, particularly for children. Keep in mind that most libraries do not install blocking or filtering programs that censor inappropriate material for children. If you are comfortable with the library's policy, make sure your child understands and follows the rules; consider setting your own additional rules. You may, for example, want to prohibit use without adult supervision, especially for younger children (typically under age nine).

Home—If you have a home computer with Internet access, monitor your child's use and establish specific safety rules as suggested in this guide. Make sure caregivers enforce the rules as well. If you don't have a home computer, remember that your child may be using the Internet at a friend's home. In this case, speak to your child's friends' parents about what supervision and rules they have established. Additionally, instruct your child to follow the guidelines you've established, regardless of where he or she uses the Internet.

Internet Filtering/Blocking Programs

Filtering or blocking software allows users to censor and restrict access to certain areas on the Internet. Each blocking or filtering program works in a slightly different way, but all use a database of forbidden sites or words that prevent your child from accessing those sites/words. Most programs contain a list of sites that are automatically blocked, and allow you to edit the list as you see fit. Other programs allow you to block specific sites on your own. Additionally, most allow you to download free, updated lists of blocked web sites and add them to your program. Some blocking programs allow different family members to hold separate accounts, enabling you to access materials that you may have blocked from your child.

Note—Some online services provide free filtering or blocking software as part of their service. Check with your Internet service provider to find out if it offers this service. If you must supply your own software, ask what programs work best with your Internet software.

Choosing a Filtering/Blocking Program

When choosing a filtering program, ask the following questions:

- What criteria does the program use to block material?
- Can you edit the blocking list by adding or deleting sites?
- Can you obtain new blocking lists on a regular basis? Is this a free service?
- Is the program easy to install and use? Does the program's company provide good customer service and technical support?
- How does the program work—through general key words, a blocking list or both?
- Does the program offer options on how it blocks objectionable material?

Look for features that allow you to:

- Monitor and control the amount of time spent on the Internet
- Block objectionable e-mail messages, downloaded files, chat rooms, newsgroups, etc.
- Monitor non-Internet software such as games, word processors, etc.
- Review Internet usage and receive alerts if access settings are violated
- Provide multi-use capability so different family members can have different access rights

Investigate each program's capabilities before choosing one for your family. Here are a few you may want to consider.

- Cyber Patrol—www.cyberpatrol.com
- Cybersitter—www.cybersitter.com
- Net Nanny—www.netnanny.com
- SurfWatch—www.surfwatch.com

Most manufacturers allow you to try the software for a limited time for free and, if satisfied, download the programs directly from their web sites. Fees for these programs range in price from \$30–\$200, depending on the program and options you choose.

Remember that, while filtering/blocking programs can help protect your child from inappropriate material on the Internet, no program is 100 percent effective. Continue to monitor your child's Internet use and enforce safety rules.

Television

Like the Internet, television can be both educational and entertaining, but some programs may contain inappropriate material for children (e.g., violence, sexual content, language and themes intended for mature audiences only). To help protect your child, monitor his or her television use and establish basic rules for television viewing.

Promoting Smart Television Viewing

The following tips should serve as a guideline for establishing rules that encourage and promote safe television viewing in your family. *Note*—These rules/guidelines are simply suggestions; only you as a parent can determine what is best for your child.

Did you know...?

American teenagers see an estimated 15,000 sexual references and innuendoes per year on television.

—*American Academy of Pediatrics*

Television Safety Tips

- Don't use the television as a "baby sitter."
- Watch television with your child whenever possible and discuss issues (e.g., intimidation, harassment, sexual abuse, drug use, etc.) that arise. For example, if a character becomes violent, discuss non-violent alternatives the character could have chosen.
- Pay attention to program ratings (as described in the next section). Often, TV guides indicate a show's rating or its suitability for children.
- Create a list of television programs that you find acceptable and consider allowing your child to watch only those shows.
- Call your local cable company to find out if it has a system in place to block television channels showing pornography.
- Set limits on the number of hours of television your child may watch.
- Keep the television in a family area, but do not make it the focal point of the room. Instead, put the television near a side wall or in a cabinet to encourage other activities when in the room.
- Don't put a television in your child's room; it makes it more difficult to monitor what he or she watches.
- Set a good example by spending time reading or pursuing other hobbies.

Did you know...?

Prime-time television depicts an average of six to eight violent acts per hour, and Saturday morning children's programs show an average of 25 to 30 violent acts.

—*National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)*

Teach Your Child to:

- Ask before turning on the television.
- Watch educational programs appropriate to his or her age.
- Distinguish between reality and the fantasy violence portrayed on television. For example, ask what would happen if a real person were treated like a cartoon character; point out that real people don't usually carry guns, fight like the television characters, have supernatural powers, etc.
- Focus on other activities such as reading, arts and crafts, and spending time outdoors.

Monitoring Your Child's Television Viewing

Monitor what your child watches on television and change the channel or turn off the television if you find a program objectionable. Explain why you find the show inappropriate and discuss your own values and opinions. For example, if the show contains too much violence, say, "I don't like this show—the people in it are too violent. There are other ways to solve problems."

Since you cannot always be with your child, set limits on television and make sure caregivers enforce them as well. Keep in mind that children may also watch television at friends' homes, so consider asking other parents about what shows the children are watching and when. In addition, teach your child to follow the television rules you've established, regardless of where he or she is watching television.

The Television Rating System

The television industry has created the TV Parental Guideline System—a rating system similar to that used by the Motion Picture Association of America. This rating system is a pilot effort initiated by the National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA) and the television industry. The ratings are intended to help parents make better decisions about the types of programs their children watch.

Although television networks and producers are responsible for rating their own shows, they must follow specific criteria. The ratings are organized into the following categories:

- TV-Y: Intended for children of all ages, including ages two to six
- TV-Y7: Intended for children age seven and older
- TV-G: For all audiences
- TV-PG: Parental guidance is suggested for children under age 12
- TV-14: May be inappropriate for children under 14; parents are strongly cautioned
- TV-MA: For mature audiences only (age 17 or older)

In addition to these ratings, the following letter ratings signify the content of a particular show:

- S: Sexual content
- L: Language
- FV: Fantasy violence (inappropriate for children under seven)
- V: Violence
- D: Suggestive dialogue

For more information, contact:

TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board

PO Box 14097, Washington, DC 20004
202-879-9364
www.tvguidelines.org

The V-Chip

The V-chip is an electronic chip required by federal law to be installed in all new televisions and in computers capable of tuning in television stations. (It can be purchased in box form for older televisions.) The television rating system is compatible with the V-chip, allowing parents to block out television shows with adult ratings or objectionable content. When a program is blocked, the television screen appears blank and audio capabilities are muted. For more information, contact:

National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTVV)

5132 Newport Avenue
Bethesda, MD 20806
301-986-0632
www.nctvv.org

For more information on related topics, please consult other publications in our education series.

The Parents Television Council has created the Family Guide—a comprehensive review of prime-time programming on each of the major networks. A brief summary of each program is provided along with ratings of the program's sexual, violence and language content. Visit its web site at www.parentstv.org.

My Rules for Online Safety

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children recommends these rules for children who use the Internet. Discuss the rules with your child and post them next to your computer. Adapt them to your own needs as you see fit.

1. I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parents' work address/telephone number, or the name and location of my school without my parents' permission.
2. I will tell my parents right away if I come across any information that makes me feel uncomfortable.
3. I will never agree to get together with someone I "meet" online without first checking with my parents. If my parents agree to the meeting, I will be sure that it is in a public place and bring my mother or father along.
4. I will never send a person my picture or anything else without first checking with my parents.
5. I will not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel uncomfortable. It is not my fault if I get a message like that. If I do, I will tell my parents right away so that they can contact the online service.
6. I will talk with my parents so that we can set up rules for going online. We will decide upon the time of day that I can be online, the length of time I can be online, and appropriate areas for me to visit. I will not access other areas or break these rules without their permission.

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