

Online Safety

The Internet can be wonderful for kids. They can use it to research school reports, communicate with teachers and other kids, and play interactive games.

But online access also comes with risks, like inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and online predators. Using social media apps and websites where kids interact, predators may pose as a child or teen looking to make a new friend. They might prod the child to exchange personal information, such as address and phone number, or encourage kids to call them, seeing their phone number via caller ID.

Parents should be aware of what their kids see and hear online, who they meet, and what they share about themselves. Talk with your kids, use tools to protect them, and keep an eye on their activities.

Internet Safety Laws

A federal law, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) helps protect kids younger than 13 when they're online. It's designed to keep anyone from getting a child's personal information without a parent knowing about it and agreeing to it first.

COPPA requires websites to explain their privacy policies and get parental consent before collecting or using a child's personal information, such as a name, address, phone number, or Social Security number. The law also prohibits a site from requiring a child to provide more personal information than necessary to play a game or enter a contest.

Online Protection Tools

Online tools let you control your kids' access to adult material and help protect them from Internet predators. Many Internet service providers (ISPs) provide parent-control options. You can also get software that helps block access to sites and restricts personal information from being sent online. Other programs can monitor and track online activity.

Getting Involved in Kids' Online Activities

More important than blocking objectionable material is teaching your kids safe and responsible online behavior, and keeping an eye on their Internet use.

Basic guidelines to share with your kids for safe online use:

- Follow the family rules, and those set by the Internet service provider.
- Never post or trade personal pictures.
- Never reveal personal information, such as address, phone number, or school name or location.
- Use only a screen name and don't share passwords (other than with parents).
- Never agree to get together in person with anyone met online without parent approval and/or supervision.
- Never respond to a threatening email, message, post, or text.
- Always tell a parent or other trusted adult about any communication or conversation that was scary or hurtful.

Basic guidelines for parental supervision:

- Spend time online together to teach your kids appropriate online behavior.
- Keep the computer in a common area where you can watch and monitor its use, not in individual bedrooms. Monitor any time spent on smartphones or tablets.
- Bookmark kids' favorite sites for easy access.
- Check your credit card and phone bills for unfamiliar account charges.
- Find out what, if any, online protection is offered by your child's school, after-school center, friends' homes, or any place where kids could use a computer without your supervision.
- Take your child seriously if he or she reports an uncomfortable online exchange.

If you're aware of the sending, use, or viewing of child pornography online, call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at (800) 843-5678 or go online to their CyberTipline. They'll make sure the info is forwarded to law enforcement officials for investigation. Contact your local law enforcement agency or the FBI if your child has received child pornography via the Internet.

Watch for warning signs of a child being targeted by an online predator. These can include:

- spending long hours online, especially at night
- phone calls from people you don't know
- unsolicited gifts arriving in the mail
- your child suddenly turning off the computer or other device when you walk into the room
- withdrawal from family life and reluctance to discuss online activities

Talk to your kids! Keep an open line of communication and make sure that they feel comfortable turning to you when they have problems online.

The Internet and Teens

As kids get older, it gets a little trickier to monitor their time spent online. They may carry a smartphone with them at all times. They probably want — and need — some privacy. This is healthy and normal, as they're becoming more independent from their parents. The Internet can provide a safe "virtual" environment for exploring some newfound freedom if precautions are taken.

Talk about the sites and apps teens use and their online experiences. Discuss the dangers of interacting with strangers online and remind them that people online don't always tell the truth. Explain that passwords are there to protect against things like identity theft. They should never share them with anyone, even a boyfriend, girlfriend, or best friend.

Taking an active role in your kids' online activities helps ensure that they benefit from them without being exposed to the potential dangers.

Reviewed by: Elana Pearl Ben-Joseph, MD

Date reviewed: August 2022