



Keeping Your Family Safe On the Information Highway

Do you know what is out there on the Internet? Many of the 30 million people who are "on line" are under 18 years of age. Is cyberspace a "safe" environment for them?

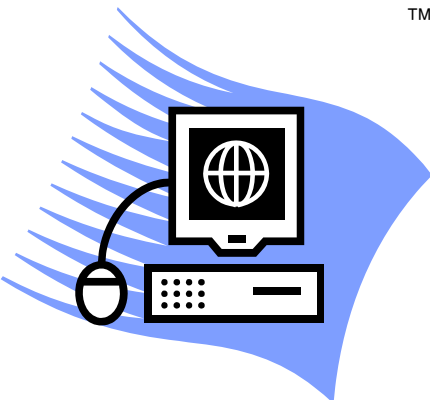
Much of the Internet contains scientific information, news, library resources, job listings, entertainment and product marketing. By some estimates, however, as many as half of all web sites contain sexually explicit information. There are also web sites that carry messages of violence, hatred and shock, with graphic text and imagery. Even worse is that most of these web sites are set up to lure viewers into spending money to get further information and access to purchase various products and services.

Unscrupulous people can penetrate sources of information that we think are secure. One weekend in August, computer hackers successfully invaded the U.S. Department of Justice web page, altered its name to the U.S. Injustice Department and peppered its sub-pages with racial slurs. Not even government agencies are safe from potential abuse of the Internet.

On balance, the Internet is an inherently safe and enormously useful medium. It enables direct communication with countless people all over the world and an unprecedented access to information.

Presently, a debate is raging throughout society and in government over the right of free speech and how it relates to the Internet. Some have suggested electronic remedies that would effectively screen out certain subjects through pre-programming -- similar to the so-called "V-Chip" for television. But, until society arrives at some consensus on how to handle this new medium, it's up to us to use common sense to construct our own "safety nets" for the Internet. Here are some points to consider:

- ™ **Think before you buy.** Consider how your family will use the Internet and sign up with an appropriate service. If education is the objective, there are excellent services available.
- ™ **Supervise your children** when they are using the Internet as you would when they watch television.
- ™ **Set limits for the time spent online** by your children and yourself. When you're in cyberspace, hours can seem like minutes. Many computers have alarms and timers built into them that can alert the user of the time they've spent online.



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- ™ **Use net etiquette or "netiquette."** Think about the many receivers of your communications. Use clear, appropriate language and avoid distortion of facts.
- ™ **Set objectives.** Limit the use of the Internet to a specific objective when searching for information. "Surfing the Net" can be addictive and can lead one into trouble areas. Time use fees for surfing alone can be costly as can purchasing products on impulse.
- ™ **Protect your credit information.** When you set up your account with a provider, you will be asked for your credit card number and expiration date. This will be used for billing purposes and, at that point, the line is secured and hackers cannot readily steal the information. Beyond the initial sign-up, however, the Internet is an unsecured communication medium that can be accessed by others. Your credit card number and the all-important expiration date can be stolen. You don't know who or how many people you are giving your number to when you order something. You might wish to order your product(s) by mail or telephone instead of placing your card number on the Internet.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children offers the following rules for youngsters who have access to the information superhighway.

- ™ Do not give out personal information such as your address, telephone number, parents' work address/telephone number or the name and location of your school without parental permission.
- ™ Tell your parents immediately if you come across any information that makes you feel uncomfortable.
- ™ Never agree to get together with someone you meet online without first checking with your parents. If your parents agree to the meeting, make sure it's in a public place and bring your mother or father along.
- ™ Never send your picture or anything else without first checking with your parents.
- ™ Don't respond to any messages that are mean or that in any way make you feel uncomfortable. Remember: it's not your fault if you get a message like that. Tell your parents immediately so they can contact the online service.
- ™ With your parents, set up rules for going online. Decide upon the time of day and the length of time that you can be online and appropriate web sites to visit.

The Internet is a medium that's here to stay and that can have tremendous benefits for education, science, marketing, entertainment and communications when used appropriately. You will need a little bit of education before you go online and a lot of vigilance once you are. Don't let your family work without a "safety net" while they are on "the Net."

Source: Center for Missing and Exploited Children. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.