

# Safety on the Internet

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The Internet is an amazing tool, available for use by millions upon millions of people every day. Unfortunately, just as many people abuse the resources provided by the Internet. Online predators abuse the Internet by using it to stalk vulnerable people, collect personal information, and plan their attacks.

Before giving your child Internet access, have a conversation about both the benefits and dangers of the Internet. Lay down a set of rules to govern your child's use of the Internet and be sure to include the following:

- \* Explain the importance of keeping personal information private. Explain what personal information is. Younger children may not understand that addresses, phone numbers, school names, and parent names should be kept private.
- \* Keep the computer in a public place. Children should not need privacy while using the Internet to network with friends or while they are doing homework. You should be able to monitor your child's Internet use at all times.
- \* Make sure your child knows that he can, and should, let you know if anyone he meets on the Internet makes him feel uncomfortable. The same applies to information or websites that your child may accidentally access; knowing how your child gained access to dangerous information will help you to prevent a similar occurrence in the future.
- \* Prohibit the exchange of personal photographs, especially with strangers. A picture, combined with any other personal information that may have been obtained, will increase an online predators chances of locating and harming your child.
- \* Make sure you have access to your child's user ID's and passwords, not only for e-mail accounts but also for any website that requires the input of personal information for private access.
- \* Prohibit your child from meeting online friends in person. If there is a reason for you to allow a personal meeting, it should be in a public place and in your presence. Your child should not gain the impression that it is ok to meet other people without your permission.

While teaching your child about the dangers of others on the Internet, be sure to explain that your child should not abuse the system or hurt others. Incidents of children bullying classmates on the Internet have increased as well, and your child should contribute to keeping the Internet a safe place for his friends as well as himself.

Once the rules are set, make sure they are strictly enforced. Not backing down will let your child know you are serious about his safety. It may not seem like it at the time, but your child will thank you later in life.

There is a great deal of increased awareness about child safety in today's society, such as teaching children how to deal with intense negative peer pressure, and implementing security measures to keep your home safe with alarm systems. In spite of this increased awareness, there could be one area that parents are overlooking—Internet safety.

Obviously with the dawn of the Internet, there is a wealth of information easily available for children to use in completing schoolwork assignments. Most schools are now supplying links for children to use in obtaining homework information, registering for courses, and even sending homework to their teacher. One has to wonder if the advent of the Internet and the use of it by educators has in fact proliferated the misuse of it by predators looking for children to take advantage of. So how does a parent keep their child safe? Here are some ideas to consider:

1. Keep the computer in a highly visible place. Some of the problems children get into are caused when the computer is located in their rooms. They can easily close the door, do whatever they want, go to whatever sites they want, and chat with whomever they want, without their parents being aware of what they're doing. Move the computer to the den, for example, where there are others around and you can keep a visual check on what your child is doing on the Internet.
2. Consider having a time frame that your child can be on the Internet. Most of the information for research papers

can be obtained in a short amount of time and consequently, your child does not have to stay on the Internet for hours at a time.

3. Do not allow your child to use chat rooms. Much of the lure of chat rooms is that it is possible to talk with more than one person at a time. A way to counter this is to invest in the conference call option you can sign up for on your home telephone. Some phone companies even offer this as a free option, or as part of a general calling plan you may already have. Conference calling (or three-way calling) allows your child to talk with up to two other people at the same time.

4. Install parental blocks on the computer. These are programs that allow a parent to block certain sites so their child cannot access them. Pornography sites, chat room sites, and violence-oriented sites are examples of the types of sites a parent would probably want to monitor and block. Most parental block programs require a password in order to access them. Guard your password and do not give it to your child or let your child see you if you log onto the controlled site.

5. Make a rule that nothing can be downloaded from the Internet without your permission. The problem with downloads is that they can open all kinds of things your child does not need to be exposed to. Many of the download sites have multiple pop-ups attached to them that can wreak havoc with the rest of your computer and potentially make your computer vulnerable to being attacked by viruses or hackers.

6. Talk with your neighbors and parents of other children to get them on board with your guidelines for computer use. There is safety in numbers—you stand to gain support from other parents in this area, and they gain support from you as well in their quest to keep their children safe.

7. Finally, and probably the most important of these suggestions is to tell your child to NEVER give out any information to anybody online, even in a seemingly innocent chat room. Make it clear to them that they should not tell anyone their name, address, social security number, age, sex, what grade they are in, what school they attend, or names of people they hang around with—NOTHING personal should ever be relayed over the Internet. One way to get your child in tune with this is for you make it very clear to your child what types of information are too personal to give out to anyone on the Internet. If necessary, make a list and post it near the computer in plain sight.

Hopefully with these suggestions, your child can enjoy the use of the computer and you can rest a little easier knowing that your child is being responsible when using the Internet. Just as you take steps to talk with your child about talking with strangers, and just as you protect your home and family in a multitude of ways, so must you protect your children from the potential dangers of the Internet. Additional information can be obtained from your child's teachers, the local police department, and websites that provide useful parental information.

Katherine Lester is an honor student. Her parents will readily talk about her academic success, her caring demeanor and her history of being the perfect child.

So what possessed her to craft multiple lies in order to obtain a passport and plane tickets that would ultimately find her in the Middle East searching for the man of her 16-year-old dreams? The lure of the Internet has a mystique about it that the U.S. hasn't seen since pen pals were popular in the 1950s and 60s. Like the idea of pen pals, most Internet conversations have a high degree of anonymity, allowing anyone to masquerade as any persona they choose.

Myspace.com now boasts more than 72 million users worldwide. Though the site has some protections for users 15 and under, there are currently no foolproof protections to keep an internet predator out. Most sign-up processes require only the most minimal checkbox stating that the user is of a certain age, but no verification process is in place for free sites. Myspace is not the only site available; similar sites such as Blogspot and Livejournal also offer free blogs. Even eBay now allows users to set up their own blog.

Lester was lucky. Her paramour turned out to be a 20-year-old mail carrier named Abdullah whose love was true, if not a bit disturbing. The two name each other as soulmates and plan to get together as soon as possible. For now, both families are monitoring Lester's online communications. It turns out that Abdullah actually sent Lester the money for her flight to Tel Aviv, Israel.

The problem lies in the fact that Lester's situation is the exception to the rule. More than 27 million people worldwide are kept in human bondage as slaves. Lester was lucky in that her Abdullah might have simply been a slave trader looking for a new prostitute for sale. There's no way teens can differentiate someone on the web who has pristine intentions from those who have nefarious plans. The popular television show Dateline aired multiple episodes dedicated to outing child predators by having police officers pose as young children online and then arranging a

meeting with the predator. These shocking images illuminate the truth that a person claiming to be a 14-year-old boy might actually be a 56-year-old man.

To protect children from online predators, the following steps can be taken to reduce the chances of a youth being led astray by an online predator:

**Have the talk.** Let teens and children know what they are up against and why. This doesn't have to be a graphic conversation, but it should be clear that there are people with negative intentions.

**Keep computers in a central place.** By keeping computers out of teen's rooms and in a central place in the house allows parents to monitor the usage and content visited by simply being "around" the conduit.

**Check the internet history.** Most browsers maintain an automatic record of sites visited. Viewing these records can give you some clues as to where your child has been on the net.

**Advise children to never meet any online acquaintance without supervision.** Some correspondents, such as Lester's Abdullah, may not have above-board motives.

**Conceal the child's identity online.** While sites like Myspace and Livejournal allow users to post pictures of themselves, instruct children not to use identifying pictures, birthdates, or other personal information that might attract an online predator.

Every generation has its own concerns about the safety and security of young people, and the threats to children and teens seem to be increasing in severity with each passing decade. Some of the most frightening situations today are found online. Parents need to be cautious when allowing children and teens access to the Internet.