



Speeding safely on the internet

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The Internet, the 'Net,' the 'web' or even 'cyberspace,' are all pretty much interchangeable. Whatever you call it, the Internet is a lot like any big

city: it has stores and malls, galleries and museums, libraries, universities, places to have fun, and opportunities to meet all sorts of people. Like any city, however, it also has some neighbourhoods and people that you should probably stay away from; this goes double for your kids.

Although there have been highly publicized cases of abuse involving the Internet, actual cases have been statistically infrequent. That there are crimes committed online—all sorts of crimes—does not mean you should avoid going there. Rather, it means that you should always be careful. This is especially true for your children.

Getting children to be 'web-smart' in the way we have taught them to be 'street-smart' is a much better strategy. By instructing children on both the benefits and the dangers of the net, we can help to safeguard them when they go online.

By taking responsibility for children's online use, parents can greatly reduce the potential risks. The first step is to be involved with your children. Get to know where they visit when online, and who they are making friends with—you would do the same with friends coming by after school. Another good idea is to keep the Internet-connected computer in the family room instead of the child's bedroom. And find time to surf the web with your child to see what types of sites they visit and like.

Some ground rules to teach children include: Keep personal information to yourself; People may not be who they say they are; Tell an adult you trust if something online makes you feel uncomfortable; and Meeting online strangers alone is dangerous. (After all, "she" may say that she's a 12-year-old from 5000 kilometres away,

but who's to know that it's really a 50-year-old man from down the street?) Early in the life of the Net, a popular cartoon showed a dog at a keyboard with the caption "on the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog!"

Chat rooms have been called one of the most dangerous areas on the Internet. A chat room is an electronic "place" that lets people engage in a live conversation not unlike a party line (for younger readers, these were shared telephone lines a lot like a chat room where everyone on the system is able to listen in). One chat user can invite another participant to "go" into a private chat room that is invisible to all but the invited. This is one way that chats can be used to exploit the unsuspecting. To put it bluntly, they are the perfect place to troll for victims.

Protecting your children while they are online works best with a multi-faceted approach. First, be involved and educate your kids. Keep an eye on where they go, and on how much time they spend online. Help them to be web-smart: don't reveal age, sex, hobbies, what school they go to where they like to play... and help them to choose an online name that will not attract predators. "FunTeen" is hardly a good choice.

Let technology help you, too. Software that filters or blocks access to objectionable content and websites is readily available. Installing and using good firewall and antivirus programs (and keeping them up to date) is also critical for safe surfing.

The Web is both a source of danger, and a solution to those same dangers. In fact, it is a wonderful resource for educating both parents and children about online safety and protection. Among the thousands of places to get good information, two good ones are safekids.com and Microsoft.

Today, keeping a child away from the Internet to keep them safe is like keeping them away from school because there could be a molester in the playground. Let your children use the Internet, but teach them to be web-smart.

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