



REPORT to PARENTS

RP 30:5

Safeguarding Kids' Online Activities

The Internet is truly a wonderful resource for our children. It allows them to see what the Hubble space telescope is zeroing in on, and watch video footage of animals in the wild. No matter what children are interested in, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of sites available to help them follow their curiosity into new levels of learning.

However, there are frightening aspects of the Internet as well, which is why families need to be involved. These tips are a great place to start:

Limit their access. Through your Internet service provider, set up parental controls on your child's screen name to prevent him or her from venturing into inappropriate sites. Also make sure that he or she can't get around those controls by going online through your screen name (or the name of another, older sibling). Keep your passwords secret and protected. For a list of programs that can help you filter out inappropriate content, go to www.getnetwise.org/tools.

Create your own version of "Never" land. Make sure that your children understand the "never" rules of using the Internet. Never give out any personal information for any reason to anyone on the Web, no matter how innocent the request may seem. Unless instructed otherwise, children are too often eager to give out their names and addresses to get free gifts through the mail or access to "fun" sites.

Cut out spam. Install a virtual filter on your home computer to prevent unsolicited e-mail and other potentially harmful materials from being delivered. If your e-mail service doesn't already include a spam filter, you can buy and install software to help.

Freedom of information. Children, particularly those in the preteen and teen years, use the Internet to communicate with peers. They create MySpace profiles and blogs. Kids consider this information private and believe that it's only accessed by their friends and those close to them—but the reality can be far different. Explain to your children that, because whatever they post online is available for anyone to

see, they should have no problem with you reading it.

Be "Checkpoint Charlie." Keep your family computer in a public area, and periodically check over their shoulder to see what sites they're on and which windows they quickly minimized as you approached.

Learn the lingo. If you don't know what a blog, an IM, and a chat room are, among other Internet terms, find someone who can bring you up to speed. The only way you can be an effective ally for your child on the Web is to understand the language.

Imposters are lurking. Sexual predators are skilled at using the Internet to entice children into online relationships, usually by setting up fake identities. Sadly, you must strongly stress that your children cannot trust anyone on the Web who they do not personally know through family or school.

Calling for help. Explain to your children that they absolutely must tell you if a "person" from the Internet wants to call on the phone or meet them in person. Such meetings or calls never can be allowed to take place without a parent's presence

(including listening in on the other line). (See www.safekids.com/kidsrules.htm for more rules that children and their parents should agree to abide by.)

Be understanding. Although some children deliberately seek out "off-limits" Web content, many times they stumble upon them while trying to find legitimate information. If your child comes to you and tells you about a disturbing image or site, understand that people are misdirected in their searches all the time, and that it was unintentional.

Read more about it! Check out some of the many Web sites that help parents keep their children safe on the Internet. One of the best is www.NetSmartz.org, developed by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

