

# **A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety**

## **What is the Internet?**

The Internet, or the Net, is a worldwide network of computers.

Anyone with a computer, a modem, and an Internet service provider can access the Internet.

People use the Internet as a way to communicate and gather information from many sources. They chat with other people online and send messages around the world. It is a great way to stay in touch with people.

## **Who Runs the Internet?**

No one person or company runs the Internet. Anyone can put information on it.

The World Wide Web, or the Web, is a network of sites on the Internet. Commercial companies, individuals, nonprofit organizations, and the government use the Web. They put all kinds of information on it.

The Internet is unregulated. Some of the information may not be accurate or appropriate for children. That is why parents should know how the Internet works. They should monitor how their children use it.

## **What Are the Risks of the Internet?**

The Internet can be a good place to learn and a lot of fun. But it can also be a source of information that is wrong, racially biased, or exploitive.

Many web sites display pornographic or violent materials. Your children may go to these sites if you don't block them. Children may also get offensive e-mail, chat line, or bulletin messages.

The Internet can also provide dangerous information, such as how to make bombs out of household materials.

Some of the businesses online are not real companies. Even real businesses may offer gifts to get personal information. Children must be careful about getting things free over the Internet. They should not have access to credit card numbers.

Under the Canadian Marketing Association's (CMA) code of ethics, marketers must get consent from a parent or guardian before collecting information from anyone under 13 years of age.

As well, many sites set cookies tags that identify visitors to their sites. Cookies tags are text files that Web sites place in the cookies folder of your computer's browser. Whenever you go to a Web site, that site's computer can upload the cookies file from your computer. This shows the sites you have previously visited. Thus, the Web site operator can piece together a picture of your family just by analyzing your Web-browsing patterns.

Strangers may communicate with your children online. Children may think it is OK to reply to a stranger because they are safe at home or school. But your child's safety may be in danger if she gives out personal information such as name, physical description, address, telephone number, or school name. Also, people chatting online or sending messages do not have to reveal their real identities. They may not be who they say they are. So someone who says she is a 12-year-old girl may really be a 50-year-old man. These strangers may also ask to meet your child.

## **How Can I Make the Internet Safer for My Child?**

There is a real risk that your child may meet a pedophile online. Fortunately, there are many ways to make the Internet safer for your children. The most important is awareness education.

You taught your children to be "street smart". Now teach them to be "Internet smart". Do this over several sessions. Do not overload them with too much information at once. This is a good time to talk about your family's values towards the things they will face on the Internet.

Children, especially teens, need some privacy. But they also need parents in their lives.

- Supervise and monitor your children's use of the computer.
- Set guidelines for time spent on the Internet. Discuss these with your children. Post stickers or posters near the computer to remind them.

Some families allow children a set amount of time for either watching TV or being on the computer. The children have to choose. This lessens the time taken away from other activities.

You can track the sites your children have visited on the Internet. Simply check the "history" submenu on your Internet browser. Some Internet providers will help you block inappropriate sites, discussion groups or chat rooms. They may even help you screen your children's e-mail. You may feel that this

is like listening to a private telephone conversation. But remember that when your child telephones someone, he knows who is on the other end of the line.

Do not give personal information about your children during an online chat or when designing or changing a Family Web site.

## **Blocking and Filtering Software**

Several software companies have made Internet filtering programs. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

- Most software blocks out words, phrases, subjects, and sites on the Web. Most can block access to the Internet at certain times (e.g., at night).
- They can prevent children from giving out personal information.
- They can block access to adult sites. They can evaluate sites based on adult content.
- They can allow parents to see which sites their children have visited.

This software has to be updated often. Thousands of new sites are added to the Internet daily.

Unfortunately, this software cannot distinguish the context of a word. Thus, it may still give access to inappropriate sites while blocking out others that are appropriate. This might prevent your child from researching a school project, especially if the subject is controversial. Also, each software company has its own ideas of what is acceptable. See your local computer store for up-to-date information on this software.

**These high tech solutions do not replace parental supervision. Your child must learn how to evaluate Internet information. The best teacher is you!**

## **Internet Safety Guidelines**

Supervise and monitor your children's use of the computer. Put it in the living room, or a family room. It is hard to monitor a computer in your child's room or the basement.

Talk to your children about what they see online. Explain why certain sites are inappropriate. This is the best way to try to keep them safe. Make your children feel comfortable about discussing what they come across. Don't blame them if they tell you about something on the Internet that made them (or you) feel uncomfortable. Work through it so that they can learn from the experience and keep it from happening again.

Spend time surfing the Internet together. This can be fun for the family. As well, your children can show you what they do online at home and at school. You can look for "Privacy Policies" on the Web sites they visit. These policies will tell you how to safeguard your children's personal information.

Make sure teens know what online behaviour is illegal. They may become involved in something illegal simply by "going along" with what they believe is a joke. You could ask your teenager to research which Internet activities are illegal. You can discuss this as part of writing up a family agreement for using the Internet.

## Sample Rules for Online Safety

Discuss the following Internet rules with your child and post them near the computer.

- ❑ I will talk to my parent about rules for using the Internet. We will decide when I can go online, for how long, and the sites I can use. I will follow these rules.
- ❑ I will not give out personal information (my name, address, phone number, school, computer passwords, or picture) over the Internet without asking my parent.
- ❑ I will never meet in person with someone that I met online without asking my parent. If my parent says it is OK to meet with them I will go to a public place with my parent.
- ❑ I will not answer messages that are mean or make me feel uncomfortable. I will tell my parent so he or she can contact the online service.
- ❑ I will tell my parent or teacher if I see something that is scary or makes me uncomfortable.
- ❑ I will ask my parent if I'm allowed to go into a Web site or chat room I've never visited before.
- ❑ I will always give the correct information if a Web site asks for my parents' e-mail address to get their permission for me to play a game.
- ❑ I will be polite to other people on the Internet. I will not use bad language or send mean messages to others.
- ❑ I will not download programs or buy things over the Internet without asking my parent.

## Where can I get more information?

### GetNetWise ([www.GetNetWise.org/](http://www.GetNetWise.org/) )

- Information about what is illegal or dangerous and what is offensive.
- "Privacy Policies"
- how to get notice from Web sites that they want to collect your child's personal information, and how to evaluate whether or not to give permission.

### Child Safety Online ([www.cyberangels.org](http://www.cyberangels.org))

- an Internet safety quiz
- sample contracts for parents and children

### [www.cnet.com](http://www.cnet.com) and [www.superkids.com](http://www.superkids.com) (search 'internet filters')

- reviews of filtering/blocking software.

### The Children's Partnership [www.childrenspartnership.org](http://www.childrenspartnership.org).

- The Parents' Guide to the Information Highway (Rules and Tools for Families Online)

### Take Action In Schools

#### [www.city.winnipeg.mb.ca/police/TakeActionSchools/takeactionschools.htm](http://www.city.winnipeg.mb.ca/police/TakeActionSchools/takeactionschools.htm)

- information on computer crime and identifying files that contain unsuitable content.
- presentation that is available to students and parents/educators.

Used properly, the Internet can be a great way to stay in touch with people and access information from all over the world. Have fun surfing!