

# Safety 'Net

Most parents know the importance of keeping kids safe online, but many of us struggle with how to do it. Find out what experts advise.

BY PEGGY J. NOONAN

Ask a modern mom if her kids have access to the Internet and she'll probably look at you like you just came from Mars. Are you kidding? With smartphones, tablets, laptops, school computers and other Internet-capable devices, of course her kids are online.

But the question we should be asking is are they *safe* online?

"The Internet opens whole new worlds for children, as well as for adults," says clinical psychologist Stuart M. Leeds, who works with children, adolescents and families in Parsippany, N.J. "But along with that almost infinite resource come considerable risks."

Internet bullying ranks highest on Leeds' list of dangers, and any parent who has watched the evening news knows how anonymous bullying can spiral out of control. But there are other concerns: sexual solicitation and the sharing of private photos and personal info, among them.

Kids don't have the experience or judgment that adults have learned over time. "There's just so much (on the Internet) to lure them in," says Leeds.

## RISKY BUSINESS

The dangers are real, and if they find your child, you may be to blame, says



national radio host and USA TODAY columnist Kim Komando. Parents who don't watch or supervise their kids' online behavior may leave them unprotected and exposed to Internet hazards, she says.

Some parents or grandparents think it's harmless to give kids the smartphone, tablet, computer or laptop they're pining for because "all they're going to do (with it) is read," she says. (Sound familiar?)

What parents don't realize is that their kids can send and receive messages and engage in full video conferencing on mobile devices, all from

the comfort of their bedroom, says author and information technology expert Simon Johnson of Melbourne, Australia.

Johnson's 2004 book, *Keep Your Kids Safe On The Internet*, was one of the first written about Internet safety. The info it provides about discussing Internet safety with kids is still valid and useful today, but "new devices and media bring new threats and challenges," he admits.

"The social media explosion and social gaming puts kids like my two children, both under 13 years, at risk," he says.

## TRUST BUT VERIFY

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents to learn firsthand about technologies such as Facebook and Minecraft, an online game in which kids interact, and let your kids know you will be checking on their online behavior.

Take the child's phone or other device periodically to see what your kids have been up to, advises Komando. "A lot of parents will say, 'Aren't you snooping?' Well, yeah, I am," she answers, adding that it's necessary.

At this age, says Leeds, "children don't realize what is out there. In fact,

parents don't realize how easy it is to even accidentally access mature or pornographic material," much of which is geared to entice children, he says. "Once you see this, a child can't unsee it."

That's why communication is so important. Kids may confront tough situations online, things their parents never had to deal with, and they need to know it's OK to talk with their parents about it and ask questions.

"Have an open dialogue," says Komando.

Not up for the task? Delegate someone in the family, such as a trusted

## SHARE THESE RULES WITH YOUR CHILD

Being safe online starts with parents. "They must get involved and stay involved with their children's online activity," not only to head off trouble now, but to help kids learn responsible Internet use, says clinical psychologist Stuart M. Leeds.

His seven rules for online safety can help kids and parents reduce online risks together:

- Never post information such as phone number, address, school or age or send revealing or identifying photos or videos to a stranger.
- Never exchange sexual messages.
- Never open email from unknown senders (even if it looks like you won something or will get something free) or download anything from a site you don't know is trustworthy.
- Never agree to meet in person with someone you met online.
- Never answer threatening, scary or inappropriate messages.
- Never write or forward rude, unkind or damaging messages.
- Always tell an adult immediately if anything online makes you uncomfortable.

aunt or uncle, to act as an adviser. "I play that role a lot with a lot of the kids around me," she says.

And when your child asks, "What about my privacy?" explain that privacy and trust are earned, Leeds says. Encourage them to share their »



**VICTIMLESS CRIMES?**

Middle schoolers need to understand: Nudity and the Internet do not mix. If they send pictures of naked body parts to classmates thinking it's a prank, they could be committing a crime and could face adult charges of creating and possessing child pornography and distributing child pornography to a minor, says clinical psychologist Stuart M. Leeds.

**ONLINE RESOURCES FOR SAFETY TIPS**

KidsHealth's Internet Safety site  
[kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/net\\_safety.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/net_safety.html)

The FBI's "Kids Safety Tips"  
[www.fbi.gov/fun-games/kids/kids-safety](http://www.fbi.gov/fun-games/kids/kids-safety); [www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide](http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide)

Kids and Technology: Tips for Parents in a High-Tech World from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
[cdc.gov/media/subtopic/matte/pdf/cdcelectronicregression.pdf](http://cdc.gov/media/subtopic/matte/pdf/cdcelectronicregression.pdf)

The American Academy of Pediatrics' SafetyNet  
[safetynet.aap.org](http://safetynet.aap.org)

Kids.gov: Online Safety  
[kids.usa.gov/online-safety/index.shtml](http://kids.usa.gov/online-safety/index.shtml)

browsing history with you, instead of feeling the need to hide or erase it. Assure them the more open they are about what they do online, the less you'll need to monitor their devices, he says.

**REMOVE TEMPTATION**

One way to limit your child's access to the bad side of the Internet is to limit their connection altogether. Consider having the Internet connection in family rooms only, and skip the Wi-Fi for an ethernet cable. Encourage the family to use a central charging station outside the bedroom, and have everyone plug in their smartphones before bed.

"When they go to bed, the technology stays in the kitchen," says Komando. In her house, even video games are stashed away and off-limits during the week, and no texting is allowed in the hour before bedtime so her kids can get to sleep on time.

Research has shown that texting stimulates some areas of the brain, which slows the ability to fall asleep. And the bright light emitted from

smartphones and tablets can trigger a chemical reaction that tells brains to rise and shine rather than snooze, according to the American Chemical Society.

**INSTALL SAFETY SHIELDS**

Experts agree the No. 1 safety must-have is Internet filtering software, programs such as Net Nanny and Safe Eyes. The programs cost about \$40 and filter offensive content while monitoring inappropriate site visits and social media use.

If your computer system doesn't support these programs, check into having your Internet provider filter content. "Many large ISPs provide a Web-filtering service. Considering the risks to your kids, I'd consider this money well-spent," Johnson says.

Komando uses Internet filtering on her home Internet service, with OpenDNS and a family shield to control access to parent-selected areas. But remember, parental supervision is still the best tool.

"It still goes back to you," she says. ●

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