

The Top 7 Ways To Outsmart Your Kids Online



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How can you make sure your kids are being safe online?

Do you know how to protect them?



The Internet is the Information Superhighway. However, it is also the Online Predator Autobahn, the Porn Parkway, and the

Exploitation Expressway. Children and teenagers are more connected to technology and the Internet as a part of their daily lives than any previous generation. There are many benefits, as well as concerns and potential problems that accompany this fact. Internet access can give children an academic edge, help them explore their interests, and stay connected with friends and family. The Internet can also be a dangerous place and if not properly supervised children can be exposed to inappropriate material and even become victims of online predators. As a technology enthusiast and an advocate for parents and kids, I am increasingly interested in helping families keep their kids safe while using

the Internet. This is one of the most important challenges that parents face today. I believe that with proper precautions and supervision your whole family can enjoy the benefits of the Internet. As always, an involved, informed and caring parent is the best ingredient for a healthy child or teenager.

Uriah Guilford, MFT

I am a Marriage and Family Therapist with a private practice in Santa Rosa. I specialize in



(707) 520-HELP

working with children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral challenges. If you know a child or teen that would benefit from counseling I would be happy to talk with you and see if I can help.

1. Learn how to use the technology

This may involve more work for some parents than others, but educating yourself in order to keep your kids safe is time well spent. You should learn how to use the privacy settings on both Facebook and MySpace. Depending on your child's age, you should have their login and password information and regularly check their online activity. Don't forget that they can easily change this information and create new accounts to hide from you. You should also learn how to check the Internet browser history on your computer. Pay special attention if the history has been cleared, which may be a sign that your child is hiding their activities. You should purchase an Internet filter for your computer and learn how to use it to control their access to certain programs, chat rooms and any type of questionable content. You can also use services from your wireless phone company, such as Smart Limits from AT&T, that gives you surprising control over how much your child uses their cell phone, who they can call and, importantly, what they can access on their phone's Internet browser. Don't feel bad if this seems overwhelming or you realize that you are behind on the technology curve. Find a friend, co-worker or family member who is tech savvy and have them help you. You may also be able to ask your child to teach you what they know and involve them in the process to show your care and concern for them.

2. Educate your children about the legitimate dangers

Communication and open conversation can be helpful in raising your children's awareness. The media loves to exaggerate, but the truth is that there are very real dangers that can negatively impact your children. Some of the most serious include sexual predators, cyberbullying, sexting and pornography. You talk to your children about sex and drugs to help prepare them for the world. The Internet is just as important a topic because it is an open gateway into a potentially dangerous world. Make sure you fully understand the dangers of the Internet and can communicate them clearly. Be sensitive, but realistic. This can involve teaching online social skills and manners and reminding them that the Internet is a public place. Teach your kids to think before they click. Help them to understand that they need to be extremely careful before giving out any type of personal information. You can also set up a Plan B with your children in the event that they stumble upon an explicit website or they are being pursued or bullied by someone they don't know online. Their first reaction should be to go to a parent or adult. It is important that your children feel safe confiding in you and that they are not fearful to share this kind of information.

3. Set clear rules and limits

Children need lots of age appropriate structure and supervision. You wouldn't let them wander around New York City alone, much less the World Wide Web. Set up clear expectations about what online activities are appropriate. You should write down the family rules for computer use and post them near the computer. These can include limits on "screen time." Be very clear about the consequences for breaking the agreed upon rules, such as losing Internet privileges. Don't be afraid to set these important limits, even if you are parenting older teenagers. They need a strong parent to protect them even when they don't think they need it. Your children will benefit from your consistency on upholding the rules as well as the consequences that are attached. They will know if and when you are paying attention to their online activity. Kids are smart, but a good parent is smarter.

4. Create new family habits

There may be some practical things that your family can change to avoid potential pitfalls. Some families end up isolated from each other because everyone is glued to their personal entertainment. Other families are too busy to provide clear expectations and supervision. Know your families' weaknesses when it comes to Internet and technology use. One simple suggestion is to make sure the computer is in a public place to encourage appropriate behaviors. This should also include special rules for when and where laptops can be used. You could create a habit of surfing the Internet with your children. Be very cautious of allowing your child or teen to be alone in their room on the Internet, even though it may create some needed quiet time for you. Think about what family habits you may need to change to create more safety for your children, as well as more enjoyment in exploring the Internet together.

5. Use the technology yourself (to spy on your kids)

You can tell your kids that I recommended this one. Be warned that they may have an unpleasant reaction if you join MySpace or Facebook and make a request to be their friend. Check out the site myparentsjoinedfacebook.com for a laugh. Setting up your own account can be a great way to keep track of your child's online activities as well as learn how it all works. Some of you may already be using technology to interact with your kids. Using texting and social networking can be a positive way to connect with your kids and lovingly parent them, as well as keep track of their online life.

6. Stay Alert and lovingly monitor your kids often

The sweetest kids can be amazingly crafty. Even if you think your children understand the dangers and follow your guidelines that does not make them exempt from peer pressure and other influences. I know you are the type of parent that tries to stay on top of things concerning your kids by the very fact that you are reading this right now. However, there is so much change happening in the world of technology and kids are also changing with every week that passes. Be aware of warning signs, such as a child who quickly closes browser windows when you come around. Other signs to watch out for might include a child whose behavior has recently changed. Maybe they are becoming more isolative, spending lots of time online, or even showing signs of depression or anxiety. Check up on your kid's online activities regularly. Keep the conversation going, both about the dangers of the Internet and the fun and exciting things they may be discovering. Your kids may resent you or call you nosy and controlling, but you are simply watching out for them.

7. Sign an internet safety contract with your kids

This is one of the best suggestions I came across in my research for this article. Families often have difficulty communicating clearly with each other and many things are left unspoken. Signing a contract may seem formal or awkward, but I think it can be very effective. It will certainly help you to have open conversations, set clear guidelines and avoid the type of gray area that kids get lost in.

Uriah Guilford, MFT

5213 El Mercado Parkway, Ste.A

Santa Rosa, CA 95403

www.helpthiskid.com

(707) 520-HELP