

A Parent's Guide to Managing Internet Use

By Tena Panizza, Psychologist, MAPS

Do you know how to keep your kids safe online? Internet access is now so prevalent that parents cannot afford to ignore effects this may have on their children



STUDENTS AT IVANHOE GRAMMAR SCHOOL GROW AS INDIVIDUALS WITHIN A CARING COMMUNITY, WHERE SUPPORT AND COUNSELLING ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP STUDENTS AS THEY PROGRESS THROUGH THE SCHOOL.

Adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years old spend between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half hours each day online. Of this, less than half an hour is spent doing homework. 91 per cent of families have a home internet connection and this is where adolescents spend the most time online (ACMA, 2007). Given this, how are parents to monitor and supervise its use?

For kids, access brings education, entertainment and round the clock access to friends. For parents, the unsupervised, unregulated Internet world sometimes evokes fear of bullying, strangers and addiction. It's hardly surprising that around 90 per cent of parents are concerned about some aspect of their child's Internet use (ACMA, 2007)*. Reports of cyber bullying, stalking, Internet misuse and addiction are rising. Parent-child conflict over Internet use has now become commonplace.

Considering the increasing risks and resulting family conflict over adolescent Internet usage, what can parents do to keep their kids safe and stay sane? Start by understanding the way your adolescent experiences the Internet, as it is very different to the way parents use it. Parents who understand the way their child experiences the Internet are better able to guide and monitor their offspring's usage.

The Internet is a dynamic place for adolescents to gather and interact in cyber communities. Participants create web pages, post photos of their world and chat in a relatively anonymous and public forum.

Ask the digital expert in your house to

show you their cyber world. Try to chat with them online — you might be surprised how well they communicate. Visit social networking sites (such as Facebook and MySpace) or join them in a game with other players. The goal is to educate yourself and show interest in an important part of your adolescent's world. Don't demonise the Internet. If you take an alarmist view and assume the worst, they will likely disconnect you from their online world.

Setting boundaries

Once you have visited their world, you may like to engage in an open conversation. For example, you might say, "I've heard about the dangers of the Internet such as kids posting provocative photos, meeting strangers and spreading lies about each other. How true do you think this is?" This is a less-threatening approach than probing about their activities online.

Other approaches emphasise the importance they place on Internet use. "I can see that the Internet is an important way to communicate with your friends. I also want to make sure that you stay safe because I love you. I want to make sure you have time to do other things such as [insert example — sport, activities, time with family]. How can we find the balance between being on the computer and doing things offline?" Invite your adolescent to brainstorm solutions. They will likely surprise you with their knowledge of the risks and their problem-solving abilities.

You can use a family Internet contract as a way of clearly laying out your expectations regarding their Internet use. Reassure them that you don't wish to remove this privilege from them but that you need to ensure that it is used appropriately because it could affect you (financially) and them (safety and wellbeing). Importantly, the plan should take into account the age and maturity of each member of the family. It's ok to give older children more privileges, so long as they are stated clearly.

The family Internet contract should be created by negotiating time limits for Internet use, maintaining privacy, safe practices (eg no meeting strangers) and a contingency plan for dangerous situations such as cyber bullying. Negotiating rules and consequences with your adolescent acknowledges their ability to be responsible, fosters trust and goodwill and increases the likelihood that rules will be followed.

Finally, include consequences (that fit the crime) for non-compliance and rewards such as an extension of privileges for responsible behaviour. Trial the contract rules for a week and revise as needed. Display the contract next to the computer and review it every few months.

General principles for staying safe online

By consistently implementing a few boundaries and putting in place safety strategies, you can reduce the risks of the Internet and family conflict.

Unhealthy Internet Use

Overuse of the Internet can compromise both sleep and healthy relationships with family and friends. This can lead to serious psychological issues. You should be concerned if your child frequently displays the following signs:

1. Disobeys time limits that have been clearly set out and agreed on
2. Prefers spending time online rather than with the rest of the family
3. Prefers spending time online rather than with friends
4. Grades suffer because of the amount of time he or she spends online
5. Becomes withdrawn from others
6. Becomes secretive about Internet use
7. Seems preoccupied with being back online when offline
8. Appears tired or fatigued
9. Becomes angry or belligerent when time limits are enforced
10. Feels depressed, moody or nervous when offline.

For a complete list, see the parent-child Internet addiction test at www.netaddiction.com/resources/parents_test.htm

Source: *Center for Internet Addiction Recovery, 2007* (netaddiction.com)

If you have addressed your child's Internet use in a respectful and compassionate fashion and things still haven't changed, it may be time to see a professional.

Getting help

Professional help from a registered psychologist in your area can be found by contacting the Australian Psychological Society on 03 8662 3300 or www.psychology.org.au

Install a filter

Installing a filter or time-limiting software can prevent access to inappropriate websites and help control the amount of time spent on the Internet. To download software, try searching "free internet filter" or "time-limiting software" in Google. Keep in mind that filters are limited and can be bypassed by tech-savvy teens.

Degrees of supervision

Do not overmonitor as this can lead to compromised relationships and is counter-

productive. Instead, establish a relationship of trust by educating them and allowing them to negotiate setting boundaries for Internet use.

Establishing a degree of supervision by having the computer in a public space allows you to supervise at a respectful distance and prevents night-time gaming and chatting, which compromises their sleep. If you encounter resistance, you can gently remind them that while you respect their privacy, you also need to ensure they are safe.

The key is to monitor your adolescent sufficiently so that they are more likely to make good choices and stay safe, but not so much that they shut you off. Getting the balance right is no easy task. Listening carefully to their needs and negotiating a family Internet contract is a good place to start.

Limit access to passwords

Adolescents often share their passwords to allow convenient access to each other's account. This may become a liability if the friendship turns sour and the former friend impersonates your child online or makes inappropriate postings. To stay safe your child should keep their passwords private and change them regularly.

Parents sometimes want access to their children's passwords. Psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg suggests that your adolescent write their password inside a sealed envelope to be opened only in case of emergency. This way they have privacy and you have peace of mind that if something happens to them you can gain access to their online community and postings. Explain that this is for their safety and don't open it unless you fear they are in danger.

Stay anonymous

Remind them to be conscious of posting personal information. For example, they should not use their full names, phone numbers, addresses or school attended. Check MySpace profile settings to ensure they are private and only known friends are accepted into social networks.

Think before you post

Adolescents need to respect their online peers just as they would friends in person. Adolescents often view online chatting as "off the record", where they can make comments they wouldn't say in person. Hence the rule: If you wouldn't say it in person, don't say it online.

What you say online stays online

Be mindful that each Internet interaction leaves an instantaneous and permanent digital footprint. Photos and conversations that might seem innocuous or entertaining

A note to kids: How to be a good cyber citizen

Do

1. Think before you post. How will others react to what you post about yourself and your friends?
2. Remember that what you upload is permanent. Keep this in mind when you send someone a text or reply to a rude message.
3. Resolve conflicts face-to-face instead of over the Internet.
4. Protect your privacy by protecting your password and avoiding stating the name of your school.
5. Involve your parents in the cyber world; they'll feel a lot better about trusting you to be in it.

Don't

1. Send messages when angry. You might regret what you sent when it's too late.
2. Forward messages that you know will hurt someone else.
3. Spread rumours or lies online or offline.
4. Post photos of someone else without their permission.
5. Post photos of yourself that you wouldn't want your parents or strangers to see.

***Source:** Media and Communications in Australian Families. Australian Commission and Media Authority, 2007.

to friends may be less appropriate for unintended audiences such as peers, teachers, family and future employers.

Pull the plug

Parents are often concerned that adolescents use the Internet and mobile phones late into the night. This compromises their ability to sleep and therefore function the next day. Negotiate a time that the Internet, game consoles and mobile phones go off on weeknights. Enforce this rule by having consequences such as no access to technology the next day.

Online harrasment

What is it?

It's possible that your child may experience online harrasment. Types of online harrasment include impersonation, deception, spreading rumours or lies and posting photos or videos about the victim

Resources

Books

Real Wired Child: What parents need to know about kids online by Michael Carr-Gregg (2007)

Cyber.Rules: What you really need to know about the Internet. The essential guide for clinicians, educators and parents by Joanie Farley Gillispie and Jayne Gackenbach (2007)

Websites

www.cybersmartkids.com.au — for families

www.safekids.com/contract.htm — to download a family Internet contract

www.netalert.gov.au — for parent information

Your Child

Ask your resident cyber expert to give you a tour of their world. Important stops along the way: social networking sites, peer-2-peer sharing sites, live chats, YouTube and any website they frequent.

without their consent. This may extend to threatening or inappropriate messages via mobile phone, email or instant messaging.

Why does it occur?

Adolescents can be more brazen online due to the sense of anonymity they have on the Internet, which decreases their accountability. It is very easy to spread information by text messages, msn and posting on social networking profiles.

What can you do about it?

Above all, remain calm. Three important things to remember if your child is experiencing bullying:

1. Block the sender.
2. Save the evidence.
3. Don't respond. This will only aggravate the situation.
4. Report it to your Internet or mobile phone provider (see <http://thewoodverdict.blogspot.com> for instructions).
5. Don't remove all of the victim's Internet privileges as they may deny instances of online harassment to preserve access.

Some social networking sites such as MySpace have "report abuse" to track and remove offending information. If the material is harassing, defamatory or threatening,

contact your local police station for further advice (see the Australian High Tech Crime Centre website www.ahtcc.gov.au). It may be possible to trace the source of the information and/or remove it. However, the information downloaded onto mobile phones and computers cannot be deleted or prevented from being spread to others.

Striking a balance

The Internet provides adolescents with exciting ways to learn, be entertained and connect to friends, but brings potential risks. As a parent, it's easy to focus on these risks and jump to negative conclusions. A better approach is to discuss safety guidelines and boundaries and to build a trusting offline relationship with your adolescent. If you don't get through offline, get yourself a MySpace account or send them a late-night text. That will get their attention!

* NetAlert Source: *Attitude and Behaviour of Young People Online* (2007). NetAlert

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