

Solutions

FAMILY SERVICES  EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

NEWSLETTER

Issue 30

Kids and the Web

The Internet, or “the web,” is an amazing piece of technology. It allows people to communicate with others around the world, play games, listen to music and research information on every topic imaginable. Children today have been “surfing the net” most of their lives, and think nothing of emailing friends across the country or listening to the latest hits from their home computer. But, while they may have learned to click a mouse before they could pick up a pencil, they still need their parents’ guidance and protection online.

A recent survey from the Media Awareness Network found that 99% of Canadian youth have used the Internet, and eight out of 10 access it from home. Despite this, two thirds of Canadian kids say their parents never sit with them while they surf, and more than half say their parents never check to see what web sites they’ve visited. These are surprising results, especially since the web can also be a dangerous place. Pornography, gambling, hate literature, online predators, illegal hacking and downloading, and inappropriate information about drugs, suicide and even bomb-making...it’s enough to make any parent want to pull the plug.

Luckily, keeping your kids safe online is possible. You only need to follow a few basic steps.

Educate yourself

So you don’t know your ISP from your MSN, and think spam and cookies make a good snack? Being uninformed about the web is no reason to let your children surf unchecked.

Make a point of learning what the Internet is and how it works. You should learn to use email, instant messaging, chat rooms, search engines, file sharing programs and any other software your kids are accessing online. Classes about the web are offered everywhere from public libraries to colleges, and there are lots of resources online.

Better yet, let your kids show you how it’s done. Sit with your child at the computer and have them show you everything they do online. It’s a great way to spend

time together, and you’ll be learning about the web and your child at the same time.

Communicate with your kids

Talk to your kids. Make sure they know about Internet dangers, and how they are expected to behave when surfing the net. Because anyone can create a web site, false information is always a problem online. Tell your children to double-check any “facts” they discover with a trusted source, like a parent, teacher or librarian.

Even though it might be difficult, talk to your kids about inappropriate web sites, hate literature, and even pornography. More than half of Canadian youth have accidentally ended up on a porn site or received pornographic junk mail. Make sure your kids know they can come to you, if they feel threatened, frightened or confused by any kind of email or web site.

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Kids and the Web (continued)

Be aware of your kid's activities

When asked what their children were doing online, Canadian parents said their kids use the Internet primarily for educational activities and research. But when the kids answered, schoolwork didn't even make the top three.

The best way to find out what's going on is to sit down with your child at the computer and ask questions. While teens may not appreciate the intrusion, younger kids will enjoy showing you their favourite sites, and talking about online conversations and games.

Computers should be kept in a family room and not in the child's bedroom, so you can walk by and check on what's going on. Also, learn how to check the history on your computer's browser (software used to surf the net) to see what web sites have been visited. If you run across inappropriate materials, don't be too critical. Talk to your kids about it, and let them know why you don't approve. Teach your children to use "kid-friendly" search engines such as *Yahooligans.com* or *Ask Jeeves for Kids (www.ajkids.com)* to reduce the risk of stumbling across unwanted pictures or information.

If your child has built their own web page, make sure you know what is on it. Ask them to remove any personal information, and make sure they have not posted hurtful gossip or rumours about other people.

Finally, find out whether your child uses instant messaging or chat rooms. What are their ID names? How many email addresses do they have? What are they? Do they chat with or receive messages from anyone they have only met online?

Chat rooms are perhaps the most dangerous of all online tools. Pedophiles often use them to gain children's trust and "groom" them for sexual conversations and activities. Be sure your child understands that they should never give out personal information, such as their real name, age, sex, address, phone number or postal code, to anyone without your permission.

Set boundaries

As a parent, it is important to set boundaries for acceptable Internet use. While many parents worry about the amount of time their child spends online, statistics from the Media Awareness Network show

youth still spend more time watching TV or listening to music than they do surfing the web. Still, it doesn't hurt to set some guidelines for when and how the Internet can be used.

Write up a set of rules and paste it up next to the computer, or draw up a family contract for everyone to sign. For example, children younger than eight, should never use the Internet without supervision. They should share a family email address, and never be allowed to use chat rooms.

Older children should only use chat rooms approved by their parents. They should never give out personal information, including their email address, unless a parent says it is okay, and they should stay on web sites recommended by parents and teachers. They should also be polite and respectful when online, and should never post or send rude messages or threats.

While teens require more freedom online, they should also understand that giving out personal information to someone you don't know is never okay, and participating in online gossip, rumours or harassment is completely unacceptable. They should also have boundaries, such as no Internet after midnight on school nights, to prevent late night surfing.

Teens should also be aware of the legal issues related to downloading music and movies, hacking (using programming to access secure information or destroy other people's web sites), and stealing content (pictures and text) from other web sites.

Finally, many Internet service providers (ISP) offer filtering or blocking software that will prevent kids from accessing questionable content. Talk to your ISP and find out whether this option is right for you.

Web sites about online safety

- The Media Awareness Network (www.media-awareness.ca)
- GetNetWise (www.getnetwise.org)
- NetSmatz Workshop (www.netsmatz.org)
- MSN Online Safety (www.onlinesafety.msn.ca)
- RCMP Web Safety Page (http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/html/websafety_e.htm)
- Canada Safety Council (<http://www.safety-council.org/info/child/children.htm>)

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call:

1-800-668-9920