



Safety In An Electronic Age

The Internet offers both many opportunities and many challenges. Students gain access to a world of online resources on the web; they can visit remote museums, consult with experts, and share their thoughts with peers in their own towns or across the world. The challenge is to help our students understand that this opportunity also brings additional responsibilities. Children, parents, and teachers need expertise in Internet safety, etiquette, and information literacy.

The following document offers tips and online resources to help keep our children safe and productive when using technology. Adults should always follow their own instincts when uncertain about whether or not a child is safe. If there is ever any doubt, err on the side of caution and disconnect the computer or other online device.

General advice:

1. Make sure all computers in your household that are used by children and teens are in a public place. The biggest deterrent to improper computer use is knowing that a parent can peek in at any moment. Children who spend a lot of time online in their rooms are at the greatest risk of accessing pornographic sites or encountering strangers on the Internet. The district does not allow any use of search engines for students under sixth grade and prohibits the use of email or instant messaging on district computers to help protect its students.
2. Discuss the dangers of chat rooms and Instant Messaging with children. Chat rooms are probably the most dangerous area for children, particularly teenagers. If your children chat, consider the use of a different screen name for them. This will shield them from inappropriate email that may be sent to all chat room members. Many chat room users are not who they appear to be; while it seems fun to teens to try on a new identity online, they need to be aware that others are doing the same thing. There is a very real possibility that a child could be chatting with a 50-year-old male posing as a 13-year-old girl. Please refer to the appendix for a government site that discusses the dangers of online predators.
3. Even in a monitored chat room, children should be alert. Topics can change very quickly and monitors can be fooled. Children need to be aware that if a topic discusses sex, cults, or any other uncomfortable topic, they should exit immediately and report the incident to a parent or other responsible adult.
4. Children must remember to never share personal information online, including their names, addresses, phone numbers, and schools they attend. They should also avoid using a web cam or digital camera to post their pictures to the web,

- and should never fill out profiles that give personal information. This is especially important for girls.
5. Children need to feel comfortable in telling their parents if something happens online. While it is frightening, parents should remain calm and non-judgmental while getting the information from their children. Children can be very nervous, especially if they've made the mistake of giving out their name or sharing some other type of personal information.
 6. Parents and teachers should remind children that passwords are private. There have been incidents at school of children accessing other students' folders when they've learned the password. AOL and other Internet Service Providers (ISPs) report occasions where children email under another user's name when they've gained access through a shared password.
 7. Be aware that Internet bullying has become a very real concern. Children and adults alike seem to say and do things they would never do without that feeling of anonymity. It is important to know that computers have addresses that can be traced, and children should understand that there could be severe penalties for remarks meant only as a joke. Email and chatting allow instant communication and many users have said or done things they've come to regret. Things can get out of hand quickly and what began as teasing may end up as a very painful experience for a child. Examples of this include cruel statements on email or chat rooms and humiliating pictures published to the web. A recent article in the Washington Post chronicled the many threats posted on Internet bulletin boards. A particularly nasty trend is for a one child to contact a friend through Instant Messaging or a chat room. The instigator, with a room full of other children gathered around the screen, encourages the recipient to share secrets and personal thoughts. It is later considered great fun to share the information at the expense of the naïve child who thought he/she was chatting with a good friend. Internet bullying can continue 24 hours, robbing children of the safety they traditionally feel at home. Parents and teachers must reinforce the principle of good character in all situations, not just when someone is 'looking'.
 8. Children also need to understand web etiquette or 'netiquette'. Typing in capitals is the equivalent of shouting and words may sound derogatory or sarcastic when that is not the intent. Many users have adopted smiley faces or the use of emoticons to express their real meaning. The simple): smiley signals that the user is just kidding. It is amazing how quickly mild anger reaches a flash point in a chat room and how quickly threats and bad language enter the picture. Parents need to be aware that the ISPs are very serious about perceived threats and that more than one child has received a visit from the police for things they've said online.
 9. There are legal issues surrounding web use as well. Children need to be aware that most web material is copyrighted and that they cannot copy and/or download it without permission. Parents may be sued if children violate copyright, especially as it pertains to music and movies.
 10. We all know there is some very nasty material on the web. The best protection for children is supervision. They should also be encouraged to tell adults if they inadvertently wander into pornographic or violent websites.

11. Finally, remember that many devices are Internet capable. Cell phones and other handheld devices are capable of receiving email and surfing the net far from the watchful eyes of parents and teachers. In addition, children have been known to use these devices to take pictures in locker rooms and other inappropriate places and to post them on the web.
12. Families and teachers should routinely point out posted Internet rules and continue to discuss Internet safety and policies with children. It is human nature to mention something once and then forget it. The Internet is a valuable resource for our children but it also has its dark side. It takes an online village to be sure that our children are safe in cyberspace.

Online Resources On Internet Safety

Safety tips:

<http://kids.getnetwise.org/safetyguide/>

FBI's Parent's Guide To Internet Safety (English & Spanish)

<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguide.htm>

Center for Missing and Exploited Children:

<http://www.safekids.com>

To report any online threats:

<http://www.cybertipline.com/>

Information for Children and Parents From the FTC:

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/edcams/kidzprivacy/>

Web Site On Safety From the Boys and Girls Clubs of America:

<http://www.netsmartz.org/flash/index.html>

CyberSafety from the Business Alliance:

<http://www.PlayItCyberSafe.com/>