CYBER SAFETY – SAFETY TIPS FOR PARENTS

These tips were published in our newsletter during Term 2.

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The website dedicated to keeping kids safe in a wired world. In this day and age of computers, there is a great need for resources for parents, educators and children for staying safe online. Knowing the dangers helps prevent children from being harmed, and knowing what to do online to keep safe is a must.

1. Make sure your child does not spend all of his/her time on the computer. People, not computers, should be their best friends and companions.

This is a rule that has recently had to be enforced at our house. I use RAZZUL software at home and it is great for children, but because of all the games that can be accessed online for kids, it seems my girls are getting a little addicted to it. I have talked with them about this and things are getting much better, and I have also activated the time limit feature in the software to only allow a certain amount of time online on weekends and weekdays. There is no time allowed on the Internet until all homework is completed and chores done as well. This rule is important especially in this day and age when childhood obesity is on the increase due to lack of exercise. I would much rather see my children having fun outside with their friends, than inside watching TV or in front of a computer.

Too many parents use the Internet as a babysitter, much like the TV. When we have things to do it is nice to have our children occupied, but let's make sure they are not spending all of their time glued to the computer screen.

2. Keep the computer in an area where it can be monitored, like the family room, kitchen or living room, not in your child's bedroom.

I am always surprised during my lectures at how many parents have a computer in their child's bedroom connected to the Internet. Computers hooked to the Internet should always be in an area where it can be monitored by adults. My wife and I built a home 3 years ago and when designing it we made sure there was a desk area between the kitchen and the family room for a computer to sit. This is where my children can access the Internet and it is always in view of us whether we are in the kitchen or family room. We had the luxury or designing our house to accommodate this but no matter how your home is set up it is always possible to put the computer area in a place where it can be monitored, especially in this day of wireless networks in our homes.

Other homes have the computer in the basement, but I have to ask - is that a place where parents frequent? Usually not, and it is not a great place to have the computer hooked to the Internet either. We have to be able to see what our children are doing online. We have to monitor activity to make sure they are staying safe.

3. Learn enough about computers so you can enjoy them together with your kids.

You have read this book so now you are learning! Again I suggest you sit down with your children and let them teach you more. You will be surprised at how eager they will be to show you their abilities. We all like to brag a bit and children are no different.

If you have to search for something for work or find an interest or hobby on the Internet, ask your kids to help. Have them show you the best way to search for things and locate them. Spend some quality time with them, and let them teach you.

4. Teach them never to meet an online friend offline unless you are with them.

Although this sounds like common sense, so many children have met with people in person that they met online as a stranger. I explained how easy it is to build rapport with children, but unfortunately children don't really understand this concept. Children are very trusting and don't think there are people in this world who will harm them. It is up to you to let them know they do exist. There are too many children who have gone missing because of these types of meetings. We see them in the news every week. If there is one rule in this whole book you remember, remember this one; children should never, I repeat NEVER meet with someone in person they have met online unless accompanied by a parent, not another older friend, A PARENT!

5. Watch your children when they're online and see where they go.

Now that your computer is out in the open (Rule Number 2) keep an eye on what sites they like to visit, or what chat programs they like to use. Knowing what your children are doing online will help you determine how much time they should be spending online as well as give you an idea of why they use the Internet. You may see them going to sites that are not really appropriate for them and when you see this you can now discuss this with them, and advise them why it is not appropriate. You can also see how many people are on their chat list, or what chat rooms they are going into and what the topic of that room is. Remember, POS means "Parents over shoulder!"

6. Make sure that your children feel comfortable coming to you with questions and don't over react if things go wrong.

Communication is the key and your children have to know that they can come to you with any problems and not get the third degree. I explained a past investigation in this book where the young girl did not want to get into trouble for having a virus on the computer so she complied with a boy's request to take naked pictures of herself. This is a perfect example of being afraid of going to your parents with a problem, and I don't have to tell you how much worse that outcome was. Sit down with your children and let them know they can come to you with any problem that arises from not only their Internet use, but any problems they encounter in life.

7. Keep kids out of chatrooms or IRC channels unless they are monitored.

This sounds like a definite rule and to a certain extent it is. I am not a big fan of chatrooms because of all the nonsense that occurs within them. I have entered teen chatrooms during investigations to find that children can use foul language and they use these arenas to spout off (flame) and bully others. I don't feel they are a healthy place for children to hang out, but if your child feels they just have to be in them, then they should be monitored at all

times. Links to inappropriate sites are posted in these rooms and in the IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels, files are traded to occupants that are not only inappropriate but illegal as well. There are certain websites that have monitored chatrooms for children but again these should be approved by the parents. Instant messaging with friends is common for most youth, but the need for chatrooms where many unknown individuals hang out is not a necessity.

8. Encourage discussions between you and your child about what they enjoy online.

Again keeping that line of communication open with your children about their likes and dislikes on the net enhances online activity for the child, and gives you some peace of mind as the parent.

9. Teach them what information they can share with others online and what they can't (like telephone numbers, address, their full name and school)

No information about your child should be given out over the Internet no matter what. I know that as children get older they will want to do things like having a blog site where they can do a daily journal but for the very young, absolutely no information should be given out whatsoever. Giving out this information is just giving ammunition to predators. Just a name could be enough to gather information about your child, not to mention what school they go to, phone number and address. Let your children know that this is one rule that must be abided by no matter what.

10. Get to know their "online friends" just as you get to know all of their other friends.

Just like we like to know who our children are hanging out with at school, we should know who they are chatting with online. Have your child explain who these friends are, where they met them and why they like talking with them. Signs that they may be speaking to people they should not would be a sudden shutdown of the computer when you walk by, or switching screens on the computer. You might also note if your children are getting phone calls from people you don't know or they are getting gifts from people you do not know in the mail. This is a very common occurrence with predators over the Internet.

11. Warn them that people may not be what they seem to be and that people they chat with are not their friends, they are just people they chat with.

Even though the majority of children on the net have pretended to be someone else, someone older or even a different sex, they seem to think everyone else tells the truth online. As a parent you have to drill into them that a lot of people pretend and are not who they say they are online, even if they know the lingo, or have sent a picture of themselves.

I recently received a call from an adult who had sent money overseas to have his girlfriend fly here to Canada to visit. She never arrived and had a story that she needed more money because they would not let her on the plane for a bunch of different reasons. My first response was, "sorry to say it but you have been taken". He said "but she sent me pictures of herself and everything." That was all it took; a picture to say "this is me" and he believed it. Now he is out a bunch of money all because someone pretended to be someone else. I found in most of my investigations, the majority of people you speak with online are not really who they say they are, especially in the younger chatrooms.

12. Discuss these rules, get your children to agree to adhere to them, and post them near the computer as a reminder.

One thing I have learned as a motivational speaker is that posting things around my office helps me not only remember but to adhere to them. When I see affirmations every day, it keeps me on track and the same goes for rules. If they are discussed and posted, chances are your children will abide by them. Included in the CD in the back of this book is also the list of rules from this chapter. You can print them out and post them at your computer so everyone in your house knows the rules.