



PEN Notes: Fact Sheet #11

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Our Children and the Internet

The Internet can be a wonderful resource for families and children. They can use it to research information for school reports, communicate with their child's school and teachers, play interactive games, and chat with friends. Children old enough to make a few key strokes on the keyboard can access all kinds of information. Most families see the Internet as a powerful tool for learning and communicating—for children as well as their parents.

Safe, sensible use of the Internet can help children:

1. Receive tutoring services
2. Get help with homework
3. Gain information for projects and reports
4. "Tour" places studied in school
5. Explore interests
6. Meet others and share information across hundreds of miles



Access to all the information on the Internet can create risks for children, however. While the Internet is a wonderful resource, it also poses risks for children ranging from inappropriate content to cyber-stalkers lurking in chat rooms. Without meaning to go where they shouldn't, children can visit websites that are offensive, or they can "chat" with persons in chat rooms who may not be who they say they are. That's why it is so important for parents to be aware of what their children see and hear on the Internet, who they meet, and what they share about themselves online.

The Internet is an amazing tool, but parents must:

- Learn more about the Internet—its possibilities and dangers
- Become computer literate and learn how to block objectionable material
- Supervise children on the Internet by sitting with them, sharing the family's values, and having discussions about the information they are finding
- Spend time online together to teach children appropriate online behavior
- Build critical thinking skills about the information on the Internet
- Support community and school efforts to keep the Internet safe for all children

Just like any safety issue, it's a good idea for parents to talk with their children about their concerns, take advantage of resources to protect them from potential dangers, and keep a close eye on their activities online.

Child Safety on the Information Highway



There are no censors on the Internet. Anyone in the world—companies, governments, organizations, and individuals—can publish material and post it on the Internet. A federal law has been created to help protect children while they are using the Internet. It is designed to keep anyone from obtaining children’s personal information without their parents knowing about it and agreeing to it first.

The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires websites to explain their privacy policies on the site and get parents’ consent before collecting or using a child’s personal information, such as a name, address, phone number, or social security number. The law also prohibits a site from requiring a child to provide more personal information than necessary to play a game or contest.

But even with this law, a child’s best online protection is his/her parents. By talking to children about potential online dangers and monitoring their computer use, parents can help their children surf the Internet safely.

(Source: Kids Health for Parents,
Steven Dowshen, MD., April 2005)

The best protection is to:

- **Supervise** children personally; spend time online together to teach your child appropriate online behavior.
- **Block access** to certain web sites or use software programs that block or filter offensive material.
- **Use software** that prevents children from revealing information about themselves such as their name, age, address, phone number. (Find a directory of these filtering programs at www.getnetwise.org/tools.)
- **Bookmark** favorite sites for easy access and to reduce the risk of children going to an inappropriate site.
- **Share** an email account with your child so you can monitor messages.
- **Review** “use histories” or logs that show Internet activity.
- **Educate** children to the problems and dangers of the Internet so they know what to avoid and what to look out for.

Establish family rules for Internet use:

- Keep computers in high-traffic areas like the family room or kitchen, *not in bedrooms, unsupervised.*
- Children ages 9 and under shouldn’t be allowed to surf the Web alone—they need close supervision.
- Older children need to have clear rules about using the Internet alone. Tell children that you need to know where they are going online and what they are doing there.
- Keep track of the files your children download, join them when they are in private chat areas, and ask often who they are chatting with on the Internet.
- Put time limits on the computer. Children need to allow time for physical activity, homework, and friends, too.
- Tell children never to trade personal photographs in the mail or scanned over the Internet.
- Tell children never to reveal personal information, never to agree to meet any one from a chat room in person, never to respond to threatening emails or messages.
- Tell children that violating the family Internet rules will result in lost privileges to go online—and then enforce the rules.