

SAFETY ON THE 'NET

Millions of people are now using the Internet to exchange e-mail, surf the World Wide Web, and participate in newsgroups and chat groups. Children can also benefit from the vast array of information that can be found on the Internet, but they can also be targets of crime and exploitation. Children need parental supervision and guidance to be sure that their experiences online are positive and productive.

Some of the risks children and teenagers can encounter online include:

- exposure to inappropriate material that is sexual, violent or hateful, as well as material which may encourage dangerous or illegal activities.
- encountering online predators who may try to set up a face-to-face meeting. In the past, pedophiles have used e-mail, bulletin boards or chat groups to befriend a child and then try to arrange an encounter.
- harassment from e-mail that is obscene or threatening.
- legal or financial risks in instances when a child may give out a parent's credit card number or other personal, financial information.

Parents can reduce the risks their children may face online by keeping an open line of communication. Sit down with your children and set some ground rules. Be open, supportive and as non-confrontational as possible. Children should know that they can feel free to confide in their parents about disturbing people or material they might come across online.

Some helpful rules for children and teenagers who go online include:

- Never give out personal information, such as name, home address, telephone number, or school name, without parental permission.
- Become familiar with the Internet and any online services your children use. Spend some time with your children and have them show you what they do while they are online. In this way, you can become familiar with all the things that can be done online, and you can try to recommend fun and educational sites to your children.
- Never allow children to arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they meet online without parental permission. If you approve of such a meeting, make it in a public place, and be sure to accompany your child.
- Encourage your children to tell you if they encounter messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, or threatening. If you or your child receive a message that is harassing or threatening, forward a copy of the message to your Internet Service Provider, and ask for their help. Tell your children not to click on any links that are sent via e-mail from people they don't know. These links often lead to sexually explicit or inappropriate web sites.
- Try to realize that people online may not be who they seem. Because you can't see the person, it is easy for someone to misrepresent himself. For example, a 45-year-old man may be posing as a 12-year old girl.
- Do not respond to any offers that involve having someone visit your house, having a face-to-face meeting with someone, or sending money or credit information.

- Set reasonable rules for your child's computer use and discuss these rules with your child. Too much time spent using online services or the Internet may be a clue that there is a potential problem.

Finally, blocking and filtering programs, as well as web site ratings can be helpful in keeping children from wandering into areas of the Internet that may be inappropriate. Some filtering programs are SurfWatch, NetNanny, and CyberPatrol. America Online offers "Parental Controls" that can create a customized account for children, allowing them to receive e-mail only from people they know. Some search engines, such as Yahoo, Lycos and Ask Jeeves, also provide alternatives for children, in which a search will return only sites that have been rated as safe.