

8 Steps to Peace of Mind Online

Make sure your kids use the Internet safely and wisely.

You don't need a degree in computer science to help your child stay safe on the Internet. You just need to remember that the same basic rules you've taught your child about the real world also apply online: Don't talk to strangers, be respectful of other people, and tell me right away if something upsets or scares you. Here are eight ways to help keep your child safe online.

1. Be there.

Keep your computer in a common area where you can occasionally peek over your child's shoulder to see what she's doing. If your child uses a laptop or an Internet-enabled media device, set a rule that she can only use it when you're in the same room. You wouldn't let your child loose in a strange playground without being there to keep an eye on things, right?

2. Be secure.

Learn to use privacy settings. Social networking sites, instant messaging programs, even some online games offer ways to control who your child can chat with online or what they can say to each other. Many sites geared toward children have special sections for parents that describe safety features and privacy settings. Visit the sites where your child goes and look for the sections marked "parents," "privacy," or "safety."

3. Watch what's said.

Tell your child never to reveal personal information online. That includes his name, address, phone number, town, school, and even the names of sports teams or clubs he belongs to.

4. Learn about your child's online world.

Become familiar with the sites your child visits. Use her passwords or create your own accounts so you can keep up to date with her online activities. Show your child that you're just as interested in what she does online as you are in knowing about her day at school.

5. Prevent infection.

Use antivirus software and schedule regular updates. And make sure your child knows never to download anything from a file-sharing site, click on an unknown link or pop-up ad, or open an email attachment from an address he doesn't recognize.

6. Think before sending.

Remind your child to stop and consider the consequences before sending or posting anything online. He should ask himself, "Would I want my parents, my principal, my teacher, and my grandparents to see this?" If the answer is no, then he shouldn't send it.

7. Keep passwords safe.

Make sure your child keeps her passwords secret from everyone (except you). Even best friends have been known to turn against one another and seize control of each other's online accounts.

8. Prevent your child from wandering.

Find some child-safe search engines and bookmark these as well as your child's favorite websites in a special folder in your Internet browser. This way, you can both rest easy next time your child has a question she needs answered or a school assignment to research. Consider this section of your bookmarks the children's room of your public library.

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