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QUESTIONS

FOR PARENTS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY + THEIR KIDS

by Liz Perle, Common Sense Media

1. EVERY TIME I TURN AROUND, IT SEEMS THERE'S ANOTHER WAY FOR MY KIDS TO ACCESS INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATE. WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES TO MANAGE ALL THIS?

You don't need to know how a car works to make sure your teen learns to be a safe driver, and the same holds true for cell phones, PDAs, laptops, and gaming consoles. The only way to really manage their use is by teaching your kids how to use these sophisticated tools responsibly, because sooner or later they will be on their own using them anyway. But make sure that:

- **THE DEVICE IS AGE APPROPRIATE.** A nine-year-old doesn't need full Internet access on a cell phone.
- **YOU HAVE RULES FOR USE.** Phones turned off in school. No humiliating other kids. No cheating. No talking/texting with strangers.
- **YOUR KIDS ARE SUPERVISED.** While it's age appropriate for high school kids to want (and earn) their privacy for communications and Internet use, elementary and middle school kids still need to learn what you feel is right and wrong, and they need to be monitored.

2. WHAT ARE SOCIAL-NETWORKING SITES, AND HOW DO I KNOW IF THEY'RE RIGHT FOR MY KIDS?

Social-networking sites are virtual communities where people convene to chat, IM, post pictures, and blog. They provide instant community, instant celebrity (what kids don't want to see themselves on a screen?), and a handy way for trying out new identities, an activity that is both age appropriate for teens and an essential part of growing up. All sites have privacy policies and monitor content (to some degree), and most have a way of configuring the sign-up process to regulate users' levels of access to the

site and to information. But social networks are still totally public and are not for elementary-aged or early middle school children. Newer sites aimed at late elementary school kids, such as Webkinz and Club Penguin, have strict access controls, but your kids will still be interacting with other strangers—and not always politely. Here are a few tips about social-networking sites.

- **MAKE SURE THE SITE IS AGE APPROPRIATE.** Young kids should not have unmoderated chats with strangers.
- **KNOW YOUR KIDS' PASSWORDS** and check their postings and their correspondence. Make sure privacy settings are set for "friends only."
- **MONITOR YOUNG KIDS.** For children who visit Club Penguin, look over their shoulders and point out good and questionable behaviors.
- **ASK YOUR OLDER TEENS TO SHOW YOU THEIR SITES.** Even if they won't share their passwords with you, you still can view their postings and weigh in on what you feel is appropriate.
- **TELL KIDS NEVER TO MEET IN PERSON SOMEONE THEY HAVE MET ONLINE.**
- **BALANCE YOUR TEEN'S NEED FOR PRIVACY AND SELF-EXPRESSION WITH CONCERNS ABOUT SAFETY AND RESPONSIBILITY.** Forbidding social-networking sites probably won't work for teens, so focus your energies on appropriate postings and safety information.
- **TELL KIDS TO THINK ABOUT THEIR PHOTOS AND ENTRIES BEFORE THEY POST THEM.** Since anything can be downloaded and forwarded, ask your kids if they want the whole world, including future colleges or potential employers, to see what they post.
- **MAKE SURE THEY AVOID ALL PERSONAL IDENTIFIERS** and avoid posting about

parties, events, or activities where a stranger could find them.

3. HOW REAL IS CYBERBULLYING? AND WHAT DO I DO IF MY KID IS BEING BULLIED?

Cyberbullying can be saying hurtful things in e-mails, instant messages (IMs), or text messages. It also can be sharing embarrassing pictures and videos of others by phone, social-networking pages, or video-sharing sites such as YouTube. It's a real and growing problem. Sadly, your child might not tell you that he's being bullied (only about 10 percent do) because he feels ashamed. Here are a few things to do if you suspect your child is being bullied.

- **ASK THEM. OR ASK IF ANY OF THEIR FRIENDS ARE BEING BULLIED.** Kids often will talk about others before they open up about themselves.
- **TELL YOUR KIDS NEVER TO RESPOND TO A BULLY.** Responding only encourages more bullying.
- **SAVE ALL CYBERBULLYING MESSAGES AND REPORT THEM TO YOUR INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDER.** ISPs, schools, and law enforcement need evidence to act.
- **BLOCK HURTFUL MESSAGES.** Cell phones, e-mail, and IM all allow you to block individual senders.
- **REMINDE YOUR KIDS NEVER TO SAY ANYTHING ONLINE THAT THEY WOULDN'T SAY TO SOMEONE'S FACE.**

4. THIS IS ALL SO OVERWHELMING AND MY KIDS KNOW MORE THAN I DO. WHERE DO I START LEARNING ABOUT EVERYTHING?

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The best way to know what your kids are doing and where they are going is to ask them to share the things they like with you. Even if you have next to no interest in an anime fan site, you will see how your kids negotiate the Web.

Have an open conversation. Ask where they get information. Have them show you the sites they visit, or the social-networking page they created. If you are interested—and not snooping—then you can share their interests while educating yourself on their travels in the Internet world. Ask to see the pictures on their phones. Have them show you how to take movies on your phone. They are happy to instruct you, and that kills two birds with one stone—you learn what they know and how they are using these powerful technologies.

5. HOW DO I HELP MY KIDS FIGURE OUT WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT IS NOT REAL ON THE WEB?

The beauty of the Web is that there's instant access to information. Kids turn to Google with all their questions. The problem is, not all of the answers are credible. Kids can read information about history, celebrities, and news on blogs that may look real, but can be completely fabricated. Help them distinguish the difference by:

- **DOUBLE CHECKING AGAINST ANOTHER SOURCE.** Kids should check information against *Encyclopædia Britannica*, newspapers, and other trusted sources.
- **CHECKING OUT WHO IS SUPPLYING THE INFORMATION.** Is the information source credible? Is it a public company whose primary business is supplying credible information, such as MSN, CNN, or the New York Times? If yes, chances are, the information is good. A public-edited source such as Wikipedia? Not always.

- **HELPING YOUR KIDS THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT WHAT THEY SEE.** Ask questions such as: What is the purpose of this site—to tell you something or sell you something? How does the site grab your attention and interest?

6. SHARING DOWNLOADED MUSIC AND TV SHOWS WITH FRIENDS LOOKS SO EASY. BUT HOW DO I EXPLAIN THAT IT'S WRONG TO DOWNLOAD ILLEGALLY?

Downloading falls into two camps: free and paid.

- **DOWNLOADS THAT COST MONEY** (and require a credit card) include games, mobile-phone ringtones, music (iTunes and its competitors), audio books, TV episodes, movies, music videos, and more. This kind of content, which is exploding in both speed and breadth of offerings, should not be shared with anyone.
- **FREE DOWNLOADS** include promotional music, peer-to-peer file sharing of music and videos (although exchanges such as LimeWire and Kazaa are illegal and can subject your computer to virus attacks and the downloader to prosecution), games, and lots of cartoons (big with the preteen boy set). But guess what? Illegally downloading TV shows and music without paying for them is stealing. Just ask the kids at UC Santa Cruz and other colleges who are now being prosecuted for it!

7. WHAT ABOUT CHEATING AND PLAGIARISM? I HEAR KIDS ARE CUTTING AND PASTING FROM OTHER SOURCES ALL THE TIME. NOT ONLY THAT, NOW I READ THAT YOUNG KIDS ARE CHEATING ON GAMES IN CLUB PENGUIN. I KNOW IT'S WRONG, BUT WHEN THEIR FRIENDS ARE DOING IT, WHAT DO I SAY?

The same rules that apply in the 3D world apply

in cyberland. Cheating is just wrong. And if you get caught, there are consequences. But the ease of texting, copying, and pasting has upped the temptation quotient on cheating. Find out your school's policy about cheating and plagiarism. Tell your kids what will happen if they're tempted. Ask them if anything is worth the consequences.

As for cheating in games in places like Club Penguin, point out that your kids are robbing themselves of the opportunity to enjoy the satisfaction of earning a good win.

8. IS THE PREDATOR DANGER REAL? I SEE EXAMPLES ON TV, BUT ARE MY KIDS REALLY AT RISK? WHAT CAN I DO TO PROTECT THEM?

The risks are real because of the anonymous nature of the Internet. Your kids should never meet anyone they don't already know. That said, kids don't always follow that advice, so you have to really drive home the fact that if they do meet someone, they must never go alone and they must be in a very public place.

Make sure your kids safeguard themselves against predators by not having personally identifiable details on their websites or blog pages. Gamer kids should choose gender-neutral names. No phone numbers, addresses, last names, school names, or any other information should be posted that could lead a sexual predator to your doorstep.

What do you do if you suspect a cyberpredator has been in touch with your child? Save the messages and report the information to the police and your ISP immediately.

And make sure you tell your kids that their safety matters to you much more than the fact that they may have gone to a website that you don't approve of. Many kids won't report something because they're afraid of parental anger or because they're embarrassed about what is usually just age-appropriate sexual curiosity.

9. MY KIDS HAVE POSTED THINGS ON THEIR PERSONAL PAGES THAT I DON'T THINK ARE APPROPRIATE. CAN ANYONE ELSE SEE THEM BESIDES THEIR FRIENDS?


You bet. Nothing is private on the Internet, no matter what kids think. Information is much more permanent than kids imagine. Just because your son has taken the picture of himself with cigarettes and beer off his MySpace page does not mean someone hasn't downloaded and saved it somewhere. And kids who are sending sexually suggestive pictures in jest don't realize that those photos can show up in someone's inbox and be misinterpreted as pornography.

Once something is in cyberspace, it can live forever. Your kids must understand that the moment they post anything, they lose control of it.

10. MY KIDS MEET PEOPLE ONLINE ALL THE TIME—FRIENDS OF FRIENDS. IS THIS SAFE?

There are real positives and negatives to meeting or corresponding with people online. On the plus side, kids can share interests, establish communities, or participate in groups. Shy kids can find outlets to express themselves. As long as your kids adhere to the basic rules of personal safety and responsible communication, online communication (or cell phoning or texting) is a marvelous way for kids to keep up with friends.

And in case you are worried that kids are losing their abilities to communicate in person, a recent Harris Interactive survey reports that as they go from tweens to teens, even though there is a marked increase in preference for communicating with technology, more than half say their favorite way of staying in touch is in person. ■■

 *Liz Perle is the editor-in-chief of Common Sense Media, a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization helping families understand and manage the impact of media on kids. For more information, visit www.common sense media.org.*

CONNECTING TO INTERNET SAFETY

AMONG RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO PARENTS AND TEACHERS ARE THESE WEBSITES.

BRIGHT HOUSE: SAFE SURFING

cfl.mybighthouse.com/about_us/community

CABLE IN THE CLASSROOM: MEDIA SMART

www.ciconline.org/media-smart

CABLEVISION: POWER TO LEARN: INTERNET SMARTS

www.powertolearn.com/internet_smarts

CENTER FOR SAFE AND RESPONSIBLE INTERNET USE

www.csriu.org

CHARTER COMMUNICATIONS: ONLINE SECURITY

www.charter.com/visitors/support.aspx?nonproductitem=303

COMCAST: SECURITY

www.comcast.net/security

COMMON SENSE MEDIA

www.common sense media.org

COX COMMUNICATIONS: TAKE CHARGE!

www.coxcommunications.com/takecharge

CYBERBULLYING

www.cyberbully.org

A GUIDE TO MYSPACE FOR PARENTS WITH TEENS

www.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=help.safetytips.forparents

IKEEPSAFE.ORG

www.ikeepsafe.org

ISAFE

www.isafe.org

NETSMARTZ WORKSHOP

www.netsmartz.org

PARENTS. THE ANTI-DRUG: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY 101

www.theantidrug.com/e-monitoring

POINTSMART.CLICKSAFE

www.pointsmartclicksafe.org

PTA: MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

www.pta.org/pr_category_details_1117232399312.html

STAYSAFEONLINE.ORG: NATIONAL CYBER SECURITY ALLIANCE

staysafeonline.org

STOP CYBERBULLYING

www.stopcyberbullying.org

TIME WARNER CABLE: CHARLOTTE: INTERNET PARENTAL CONTROL

www.timewarnercable.com/charlotte/products/internet/parentalcontrols.html

TIME WARNER CABLE: PARENTAL CONTROLS

www.timewarnercable.com/corporate/customerservice/parentalcontrols.html

WIRESAFETY

www.wiredsafety.org