Internet Safety for Kids

To keep your child safe in the real world, you've taught him how to act in public — even when you're not with him. Now that he may be using the Internet more and more, it's equally important to teach him how to stay safe in the virtual one.

For starters, it's key that your child learn how to communicate with others online. It's also essential that he can figure out if people on the Internet are being authentic and trustworthy — and that he knows to come to you if he suspects something is wrong.

Here are six tips for keeping your child safe online:

1.) Teach your child that not everyone online is trustworthy.
Make sure your child understands that people he meets online may not be who they seem. Explain how the nature of the Internet makes it easy for people to portray themselves in ways that don't reflect reality — and why this can be dangerous. A worrisome example is an adult who uses online connections to establish trust with a child as a way of encouraging that child to meet him or her in person. Or a classmate might pretend to be a child's friend online, only to bully that child later.

2.) Tell your child not to disclose information that is too personal.
This, of course, includes your child's name, phone number, and address. Less obvious but equally dangerous information to share includes online passwords, his school name and location, events he will attend, and times when he's alone (e.g., walking to and from school). Even photographs he posts online should not contain personally identifying clues (e.g., the name of his school in the background).

It is especially important to help your child have strategies to protect himself when he is engaged in fun, lively, and direct interactions with other people online. A child needs to understand that even if he is on a friend's personal blog or posting to a message board intended only for his classmates, other people may still see his information.

3.) Check out the privacy policy and terms of service for each website your child visits.
A website's privacy policy should be available through a link on the homepage and in each area where personal information is collected from users. (The law actually requires this for all websites aimed at children under 13.) Read the policy closely to learn the kinds of personal information being collected, how it will be used, and whether it will be passed on to third parties. If you find a website that doesn't post basic protections for children's personal information, ask for details about its information-collection practices.

4.) Keep the computer in the family room, kitchen, or living room — not in your child's bedroom.
If your child knows you are observing him — or you could walk by at any time — he may be less tempted to engage in risky or inappropriate behavior online.

5.) Be clear about your rules.
Discuss the rules for using the computer and post them nearby.

6.) Find ways for your child to use the computer on your terms.
If you aren't comfortable with your child using the Internet at home when you're not there, find acceptable alternatives such as arranging for your child to go online at his school library.

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