

Cyber Safety: Protecting Kids and Teens Online is Everyone's Responsibility

Over the last decade, cell phones and laptops have become as commonplace as TVs in our homes. Younger and younger children are being given unrestricted access to the internet and all that comes with it. iPhones and iPads are prime for apps like SnapChat, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook and have become the fabric of teenage social lives across the country.

But with all of this changing technology that grants us access to the world around right at our fingertips in a way it didn't even ten years ago when the iPhone was in its infancy and the iPad hadn't yet hit the market, comes more responsibility for what our children and teens are doing behind the glow of those screens.

What happens when boundaries are crossed between acceptable use of these devices and a violation of trust? What are the legal consequences of those who abuse the privilege of the internet; because make no mistake, the internet is a privilege to those who use it, not a right. Those who violate the law not only face legal consequences of their actions, but civil rights litigation may be brought against them as well. This article will detail what parents need to know to keep kids and teens safe online and what adults need to know if they find their child or teen has become the victim of an adult's inappropriate internet behavior.

Screen time vs. free time

When it comes to the internet, we've become a culture consumed in tweets, texts, and Facebook likes. As adults we're responsible for own monitoring of how much time we spend on our phones and tablets; the same cannot be said for children, who will jump at the chance to play an iPad game instead of complete their homework. Our consumption of technology has gotten to the point where unless enforced, children would rather SnapChat than play outside!

One of the most important aspects of childhood is innocence. Playing outside, riding bikes, and swimming should be part of a healthy and happy childhood. That's why parents should step in and closely monitor what their young children are doing when the iPad is in front of them. Newly implemented apps such as Apple's *ScreenTime* and old standards such as Windows' *Parental Controls* are all helpful in creating a fun but responsible use of the internet for children and teens.

The most important things parents should ask themselves when setting up devices for younger children are:

- How much time is reasonable to spend behind a screen?
- What is age appropriate for my child to do while using the internet?
- How will I enforce these rules in a healthy and constructive way?

TTYL, LOL, BRB

While many of us grew up with some form of the internet around, new technology like SnapChat and Instagram have paved the way for parents to lose sight of exactly what teens are doing. We see a “gram” or a “snap” and it’s easy to misinterpret the context of these images and videos. That’s why parents must be diligent in protecting their teens from being taken advantage of.

Nothing we do online is ever completely private or safe from the eyes of onlookers. There are criminals who lurk online waiting for a teen to post what they may feel is an innocent photo of themselves with their friends so they can contact the teen under the guise of having mutual friends. This happens more than parents would care to think, as the reality of what can happen when a teen meets up with someone they claim to “know well” from the internet is horrifying.

What can parents do in their efforts to remain vigilant against cyber predators?

- Maintain an updated record of their teens’ passwords
- Set time limits for when iPhones, iPads, and other internet-enabled devices can be used
- Know where their teens are going and what time they’ll be home; this can prevent tragic instances of kidnapping should a teen attempt to meet with a stranger they’ve only interacted with online

Conversation is key

Perhaps the most important thing parents of young children and teens alike can do, though, is to have an open dialogue. SmartSocial.com provides insight to this simple line of communication between parents and children:

“The first step in creating a safe online world for children is simply having a conversation. Most parents do a good job talking to their children about “saying no” to tobacco, alcohol, and drugs, but starting a conversation about cyber safety can be harder. However, parents do not need to know as much as or more about technology than their children to talk about their concerns.”

Instances of cyber crime and the presence of cyber predators is ever present. With the internet ingrained in all of our lives as a permanent fixture, as parents we must be dutiful and responsible for not only the amount of time spent on internet-enabled devices, but for the content our children are consuming on them. Below you’ll find a quick list of resources that can help parents better implement internet safety in their homes and on the go:

- [SmartSocial](http://SmartSocial.com)
- [Internet Safety by KidsHealth](http://InternetSafetybyKidsHealth.com)
- [Child Safety by StoryPark](http://ChildSafetybyStoryPark.com)

Parents can also call their ISP and request assistance with setting up time limits and parental controls on their home routers and modems.

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