

## ***INTERNET SAFETY - Children need parental involvement and protection***

Children in America are exposed to many hours of electronic media every day, and most children spend 4 – 5 hours every day in front of a screen – watching television, playing video games, or using the Internet. About 80% of American households have a computer, and the Internet is available in most of those homes. Many of these children have computers and Internet access in their bedrooms. Even children who do not have Internet access at home have the opportunity to “go on line” at school or at the public library. 78% of teenagers between 13 and 17 years old reported that they were alone while using the Internet, and approximately 1 in 5 teens was the object of unwanted solicitation. So, it is very important that you monitor and control your child’s access to and use of all forms of media, especially the Internet.

The major risks to your child when he/she uses the Internet are:

1. Exposure to pornographic material
2. Exposure to material that encourages dangerous or illegal activities, including illegal drug use and suicide
3. Exposure to violent or hateful material
4. Exposure to harassment through emails or chat rooms
5. Sharing of personal and family information; financial information
6. Unwanted solicitation

### **UNWANTED SOLICITATION**

Many of the sexual solicitations were propositions for “cybersex”, a form of fantasy sex in which chat room participants describe sexual activity and may masturbate. One study found that 70% of the solicitations occurred while the youth were at home; 22% while they were at someone else’s home. 65% of the solicitations involved chat rooms; 24% involved instant messaging. In 10% of the solicitations, the perpetrator asked the child to meet in person.

### **SEXUAL EXPOSURE**

At least 25% of children using the Internet regularly are exposed to sexual images. This happens through Internet searches, misspelled words, and links within a website. Many children are embarrassed and frightened by these exposures, but less than 40% of children tell their parents what happened.

Children and teens can also access sexual information, including information about birth control methods, pregnancy, and STDs on the Internet. Some of the sites used to obtain information will also describe explicit sexual activities.

### **HELPFUL GUIDELINES**

1. Talk with your children about the dangers of the Internet
2. Think about having your child sign a contract stating exactly what she will and won’t do on the Internet. Be specific. Suggestions for a contract include:
  - a. I will never give out my name, address, phone number, password, or other personal or family information
  - b. I will never download photographs from an unknown source or site
  - c. I will never accept offers of free merchandise or give out financial information (credit card numbers, social security numbers, bank account numbers)
  - d. I will not post pictures of myself on the Internet and will not provide physical descriptions of myself or any family members on the Internet
  - e. I will not respond to emails from unknown addresses
  - f. I will not write in emails anything that I would be embarrassed to have published at school
  - g. I will never arrange to meet any one I have met online

- h. I will never respond to messages (email, chat rooms, instant messages) that are sexually explicit, humiliating or embarrassing. I will tell an adult if this happens.
  - i. I understand that not all the information on the Internet is truthful. I will ask my parents about any material that makes me feel uncomfortable or confused.
3. Spend time with your children when they are online. Ask them to show you their favorite web sites.  
NOTE: Even sites specifically for children will often ask the child to disclose personal information
  4. Keep your computer in an area of your home where the screen is visible to you and other family members. DO NOT ALLOW your child or teenager to have a computer in his bedroom.
  5. Let your child know that you will monitor her online accounts and the sites she has visited. Then make sure you do check the computer's use history. If your child participates in virtual worlds, have her show you her world and learn what activities she enjoys.
  6. Know where else your child may access the Internet – school, library, a friend's home and find out what safeguards are in place there. Remember mobile phones and some game consoles can be used to access the Internet.
  7. Consider purchasing "blocking software" that prohibits access to certain sites. There are several types of blocking software available, and it is important to know that none of them will block all offensive material.
    - a. Even if you install blocking software, you must still monitor your child's Internet activity
    - b. Choosing an ISP provider that filters email and limits "spam" will help limit the amount of sexual material coming into your email system.

Report any suspicious activity to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at their Cyber Tipline at 1-800-843-5678 (1-800-THE-LOST). Also report any questionable activity to the ISP as they are mandated to report child pornography and crimes against children to the FBI.

The FBI has published *A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety* available on line at:  
<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm>

The FBI also has a new interactive web site, "Safe online surfing" to teach children from 3<sup>rd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade Internet safety. It is found at: <https://sos.fbi.gov/>

Other web sites to teach children and parents Internet safety are:  
<http://www.safekids.com> (Age specific contracts available here)  
<http://kids.getnetwise.org>

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