Common Sense on Internet Safety for Middle School Kids

Help your middle schooler develop safe online behavior

In the middle school years, teens begin social networking, creating and uploading comments (blogs, videos, pictures), downloading music and other files, researching subjects for school, chatting on IM, video-chatting, and more. In short, middle schoolers are leading digital lives.

At this age, the Internet is no longer a solitary or passive experience. For preteens and teens, the Internet is social. Teens are using the Internet to express themselves and to experiment anonymously with different identities. While the desire to strike out on their own is age-appropriate, these kids still need parental guidance (sometimes from a respectful distance) on how to conduct themselves safely online.

Some facts

Most teens are online: 91% have an email address; 60% have an instant-message screen name; and 72% have profiles on social networking sites (*Harris Interactive, 2009*).

77% of 8- to 15-year-olds said they'd rather give up TV than give up the Internet (*Pangea Media and YPulse, 2009*).

27% of all 9- to 17-year-olds work on blogs or other online spaces at least three times a week (*Grunwald Associates, 2008*).

1 in 5 kids 8 to 17 say they do things online that their parents would not approve of (*Norton Online Living Report, 2007*).

Why Internet safety matters

Young teens don't yet have an "off" switch in their brains. That means that they often act impulsively. This lack of impulse control combined with online anonymity could lead middle schoolers toward dangerous behaviors: cyber-bullying, inappropriate photo or video uploads, illegal downloads, meeting strangers — even cheating. Because socializing is so important to young people, online interactions can become pretty intense — whether they're playing games, chatting with friends, or sharing work.

Teens are creating a digital footprint that can last a long time in cyberspace. Things they post can be forwarded by others and viewed by vast anonymous audiences. If you teach them to self-reflect before they self-reveal, their online experiences are more likely to be safe.

The first step to keeping your preteens and teens safe on the Internet is to find out what they're doing online to make sure they're behaving respectfully and responsibly. Talk to them about what's appropriate to say to others, what kind of content is okay to upload and download, and what kinds of interactions are important to avoid. Helping your children become responsible digital citizens is what will ultimately keep them safe online.

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Internet Safety Basics:

» Never share names, schools, ages, phone numbers, or addresses.

» Never open an email from a stranger — it may contain viruses that can harm a computer.

» Never send pictures to strangers or view pictures that strangers send to them.

» Keep passwords private (except to parents).

» Tell a trusted adult if something mean or creepy happens on the Internet.

Strategies for responsible — and safer — online life

» **Visit age-appropriate sites.** Find sites that promote learning, creativity, and that deepen your kids' interests. Also check out popular Web sites before your kids visit them. Despite what your kids might tell you, social networks like MySpace or Facebook are not meant for middle schoolers.

» **Minimize chatting with strangers.** Tell your kids that people aren't always who they say they are on the Internet. Anyone can pose as a "buddy of a buddy." If kids are playing online games with people they don't personally know, they should be careful not to disclose anything personal.

» **Help kids think critically about what they find online.** Young people need to know not everything they see is true. You may wish to use safe-search settings or filtering software for younger kids. And you can always check browser histories to see where your kids have been.

» **If they wouldn't do it in real life, they shouldn't do it online.** Remind them: Don't say mean things, and don't cheat in games or at school.

» **Have some rules about time and place.** Set limits on the amount of time your kids spend online. Don't let them Instant Message (IM) while doing homework. Restrict time and sites for online gaming.

» **Agree on downloads.** What music is okay? Which video sites? Don't just hand out your credit card information to your kids. If they need to buy something, you should be involved.

» **Talk about privacy.** Remind your kids that when they post something online, they lose control of it. It can be cut and pasted and sent around the Web. Show kids where privacy settings are on their favorite sites and help them think about the settings they should use.

» **Make sure kids feel safe reporting bad behavior.** It doesn't have to be you, but if anything suspicious, mean, or scary happens, they need to know they won't get in trouble if they tell a trusted adult.

» **Be involved and view your own habits carefully.** Parents are their role models for safe and smart use. Enjoy the good stuff together!