

Technology Practices

Keeping Children Safe as They Learn to Use the Computer

*By Erika Allen, J.D., Ph.D.
Consultant to the VIRTUS® Programs*

This past week, my second-grade son came home with yet another assignment this year that will require independent research. Now, my response to this project was probably similar to what many of yours would be: First, I cite research conducted in the second-grade as example #621 of “how much smarter kids are these days.” (In second grade, I distinctly remember that we still played with wooden mosaic tiles and had recess twice a day.) Second, I cringed thinking about how many extra hours of homework support “independent research” will mean to me personally during this already too-busy week. Third, I have to admit that I was a little jealous because, frankly, learning all about the Adele penguins sounded totally fun.



Of course, grade school research no longer means pulling out a color-coded volume of Childcraft encyclopedias. Nowadays, even our young kids are expected—if not required—to use the computer to prepare assignments. And, of course, this is often supported by computer curriculum in school and, at least in my house anyway, by a healthy dose of computer-based games. All this adds up to the fact that kids as young as seven are “surfing the web” independently.

Just as caring adults have a responsibility to keep kids safe as they learn to cross the street, we have a responsibility to keep them safe as they begin to navigate online. For older children, this may involve monitoring the various social networking sites or learning to decipher instant-messaging shorthand. For the youngest users, however, the guidelines are more basic but just as important. Perhaps some of the following lessons will be useful to you, as well...

Monitor the monitor. Young users should never be online alone. While the risk posed by Internet predators may not worry you as much if kids are not using social networking sites, caring adults should still be concerned about the information or graphics kids could stumble upon accidentally when searching for legitimate information or games. Adults need to be accessible to help guide their searches—or to quickly close an unexpected site.

Centrally locate the computer. The computer that my children are allowed to use is located in the kitchen, a central spot for us, as it is in many homes. Having it in the kitchen simply makes it easy for me to monitor my kids' use—and allows them plenty of computer time during meal preparation or clean up. Making it easy for me to monitor simply means I am likely to do a better job and, like most parents, I need all the help I can get! In public settings, schools and libraries should make every effort to position computers well within range of adult supervision as well.

Know a few safe, kid-friendly sites. Identify a few sites that you feel comfortable allowing kids manipulate themselves. While you should always be in eyeshot of the monitor, young people should have the chance to learn how sites work and discover independently the wonderful resources available online. Sites that are more likely to facilitate independent use are probably those that are kid-specific and that limit advertising. A child's teacher can often assist in selecting a few that would be the most appropriate.

Make sure all caregivers know the basics. Perhaps this point is best made by illustration: A few months ago, my son wanted to look online for certain animated videos. I sat with him as we browsed what was available on several sites. Now, I am savvy enough to expect that mixed in with the many cool, kid-appropriate clips we found were going to be some that were sexually explicit or violent or just contained humor that isn't appropriate for a seven-year old. We just didn't open the files that looked like they might be trouble. Working that way we found tons of great stuff and, I gotta' tell you, we both had a blast!

Things became tricky the following week, however, when my boys stayed the night with my parents. My eldest son wanted to show them some of the great clips that he and I had watched together. He found easily found the site by himself and correctly relayed that "my Mom says these videos are fine for kids." My parents, though, just didn't know what to do with content filtering and, while they were in the other room, he ended up watching a raunchy video that I had previously blocked.

The lesson here is that anyone who helps your child with the internet needs to know and follow the same guidelines you have at home. My mom and dad are super grandparents, but I had failed to remind them that they should always be sitting with my son while he is online. Moreover, I hadn't identified for them the few websites that are, in my experience, safe places for his to explore. Most importantly, I should have flagged the site with video clips as a site that needs specific oversight.

Communicate. Children need to know why you are being vigilant as they work online. At our house, I say simple things like, "Just like with movies and books, some sites are aren't good for kids. I want to make sure you find the ones that are." Moreover, your kids need to know that they will never get in trouble for

telling you what is happening online. I am so thankful that our son told my parents right away about the video clip that he accidentally viewed. As uncomfortable as it was, they were able to respond to what he saw. And, at least I hope, we are setting the stage for open communication about the potential dangers he might face from internet predators.

What is the real reason for all of these internet rules—and, for that matter, most rules in general? To create a framework in which all children can live big, adventurous lives—safely. Now, we certainly don't do everything right around our place. But I'd like to believe that these guidelines will help my children enjoy some great entertainment... and learn all about the Adele penguin!

Copyright © 1999 - 2007 by The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. All rights reserved.

This article is the copyrighted property of The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. (National Catholic), all rights reserved, and is reprinted here with National Catholic's permission. It originally appeared on the VIRTUS Online risk management website at www.virtus.org <http://www.virtus.org/>. For more information about VIRTUS Online or other VIRTUS products and services, call 1-888-847-8870.