

Faculty and Employee Assistance Program

Parenting in the Computer Age-Keeping Up with the Kids

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"I'll ask my 12 year old!" is the response often given these days when a parent runs into difficulty with his/her own computer or other techno gadgets. Our children are very comfortable with technology, the speed and the ease of communication and we are all clear that the Internet has replaced hard print encyclopedias, dictionaries and thesauruses when it comes to writing and research. So, in this world of computer speed, ease and especially access, most parents wonder if they should monitor computer use more closely and if so, how and what should be monitored.

Like teaching children how to manage money, teaching them how to responsibly interact with others through the computer requires new strategies and approaches as they mature but the following material provides some general ideas and conversation points for family discussions.

Quick Parenting Tips

- Keep the computer with internet access in a high traffic area of the family living space so you can better see and hear what is going on. Think twice about having a computer in a child's bedroom and think thrice about having a bedroom computer with Internet access.
- Advise your children not to reveal personal information over the Internet and to let you know if someone is seeking that from them.
- Teach your children how to search online appropriately. Filters are available but can create a false sense of security for parents as children and teens can learn to bypass them quickly.
- Use blocking software to manage pop-ups.
- Consider a family contract for computer use. Keep it by the computer, review it regularly and update it as the children get older. Be sure and involve the kids in the development of the contract, its content, and the consequences for non-compliance.
- Have house rules for computer and Internet use and consider computer use a privilege to be maintained, not a right. Rules might include time limitations, being purposeful rather than just surfing, how to behave ethically and responsibly while online, sharing with other family members, etc.
- Advise your children NOT to use another family's computer without that parent's permission and to ask what their family rules are on computer use – it is just polite.
- Remember that portable devices such as cell phones, iPods and PDAs can interface with the Internet too.
- Stay educated yourself – parental naivete can be a problem.

Other FAQs by Parents

What about separate email accounts?

Younger children can share the family email address to start learning how to email appropriately. Around middle school, kids may want their own email address through the family account depending on maturity and level of responsibility demonstrated thus far.

What about online harassment? This can occur in several forms such as through IM, online

cooperative games, social websites and general email. It is possible to block senders and your email service provider or Internet service provider can give you assistance. The local police should be involved if harassment continues or if sexual material is being purposely sent to minors.

Should I read my child's email or check his/her history file?

Again – computer use is a privilege, not a right. As a parent you are responsible for your child's safety so if you have concerns about the computer use, you may want to follow-up and see for yourself. Ultimately, though, having clear rules about computer use and good communication between yourself and your kids is more effective.

Is the computer addicting for children?

It certainly can be. It can also isolate people so, as with anything else, moderation is the key. If computer use is starting to interfere with relationships, education, sleep or health, then it is time for a serious look at use patterns to make some changes.

What's MySpace? MySpace.com and facebook.com are two very popular combo websites for social networking

where teens can chat, email, post bulletins, photos and information about themselves and others, and file share. As with any other computer application, the sites aren't inherently dangerous but can be used to exploit, harass, gossip or hurt feelings if used inappropriately.

What's a parent to do? First of all – talk with your children about responsible computer use and wrap that into the frequent discussions of your family values. *Being respectful*, on and off the computer, is usually a top value in most families. Secondly – impress upon your children that computer use is a privilege, which they can maintain or lose depending on the choices they make. Thirdly – keep an eye on things, stay involved and keep yourself educated about computers.

Helpful Websites for Parenting and Computers

<http://www.safekids.com/>

<http://www.getnetwise.org>

www.safespacers.com

www.blogsafety.com

<http://www.bewebaware.ca/english/faq.aspx>

“A Parent's Guide to Online Safety: Ages and Stages,” at

<http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/children/parentsguide.mspx>

“Kids and the Internet – Frequently Asked Questions” at

<http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/children/kidsafetyfaq.mspx>

