

Common sense to Cybersense

Translating what we already know to cyberspace

Our Wired Kids programs make it easy for parents. Already with too much on their plates, we can't expect every parent to sit at their children's side every second they are online. We have work and other obligations. And while we need to supervise what they do, we also need to find ways to do this without having to earn a Ph.D. from MIT in computer science.

How can we take what our grandparents taught our parents and our parent taught us and apply it to cyberspace? It's easier than you think. Keeping your children safe online isn't about technology, it's about common sense and communication.

- Don't talk to or accept anything from strangers. Online, everyone is a stranger. And one of the fun things is being able to talk with children from Australia or Hong Kong. So we need to teach our children how to talk to strangers safely, and keep them from talking to them outside of a monitored setting. You also must teach them that anyone can masquerade as anyone else online. The "12-year-old" girl they have been talking to may prove to be forty-five year old man. It's easy for our children to spot an adult in a schoolyard, but not as easy to do the same in cyberspace.
- Come straight home after school. Parents over the generations have always known that children can get into trouble when they wander around after school. Wandering aimlessly online isn't any different. Allowing your children to spend unlimited time online, surfing aimlessly, is asking for trouble. If they are just surfing randomly, set a time limit. You want them to come home after they're done, to human interaction and family activities (and homework).

Don't provoke fights. Trying to provoke someone in cyberspace is called "flaming." It often violates the "terms of service" of your online service provider and will certainly get a reaction from other people online – a bad one, and you certainly don't want that. Flaming matches can be heated, long and extended battles, moving from a chat room or discussion group to e-mail quickly. If your child feels that someone is flaming them, they should tell you and the moderator in charge right away and get offline or surf another area. They shouldn't try to defend themselves or get involved in retaliation. It's a battle they can never win.

- Don't steal. While downloading music without paying for it, and copying a friend's computer game or software may be common these days, it's still wrong. It's very important that we teach our children how to behave well online. Just because they can take things without paying for them doesn't mean they should. And it also doesn't mean we should turn a blind eye to what they do online, even if it means we save some money in the process. We need to teach our children that being a good citizen means following the rules and laws even if some others don't and even if we think we can get away with it.
- Don't tell people personal things about yourself. You never really know who you're talking to online. And even if you think you know who you are talking to, there could be strangers lurking and reading your posts without letting you know that they are there. Don't let your children put personal information on profiles or away messages. It's like writing your personal diary on a billboard.

With children especially, sharing personal information puts them at risk. Make sure your children understand what you consider personal information, and agree to keep it confidential online and everywhere else.

Also teach them not to give away information at Web sites, in order to register or enter a contest, unless they ask your permission first. And, before you give your permission, make sure you have read the web site's privacy policy, and that they have agreed to treat your personal information, and your child's, responsibly.

- We need to get to know your friends. Get to know their online friends, just as you would get to know their friends in everyday life. Talk to your children about where they go online, and who they talk to. Don't just set up the computer in the corner of their bedroom, and leave them to surf alone. Take a look at their computer monitor every once in awhile; it keeps them honest.

There are many more just as simple as these. When we tell you it's not about technology, it's about parenting and teaching our children solid values of right and wrong, this is what we mean. And it's worth the effort. When our children surf the Internet, they are learning skills that they will need for their future. They become explorers in cyberspace, where they explore ideas and discover new information. Also, because there is no race, gender or disability online, the Internet is the one place where our children can be judged by the quality of their ideas, rather than their physical attributes.

While your children may know more about the technology, you know more about what's right and life. Sit at their side while they compute when you can. It will help you set rules that make sense for your child. It also gives you an unexpected benefit...you'll get a personal computing lesson from the most affordable computer expert you know!

Teach them what you know, and if you're lucky enough...they may teach you what they know too!