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Internet Safety and Your Teen

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Summary Internet Safety and Your Teen

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Introduction

Let's start with a statistic. According to a 2006 Pew Internet & American Life study, 74% of high school age children in the U.S. use the Internet regularly. That represents a very large target for entities ranging from legitimate publishers and marketers to scammers and predators.

Internet smart, emotionally vulnerable

By the time kids reach high school, they're likely to know as much or more about the Internet than do their parents. Teens use the Internet for schoolwork, communication and social networking, finding and downloading music, playing games, and shopping for everything from clothing to electronics products. But although they know their way around the Internet, they may lack the judgment and emotional maturity to steer clear of trouble. Teens are, after all, children. And children are vulnerable. That's where you come in.

The scope of the problem

To help you better understand why your teen needs your support and supervision online, here are some statistics about the Internet experiences of 13-17 year olds culled from recent surveys by the U.S. Department of Justice, Cox Broadcasting and the New Hampshire Crimes Against Children Research Center.

Online Threats to Teens

- 71% have received online messages from someone they don't know
- 45% have been asked for personal information by people they don't know
- 61% have posted a personal profile on social networking websites such as MySpace, Friendster or Xanga, and half of them have also posted pictures of themselves
- 34% saw sexual material online that they didn't want to see
- 13% received online sexual solicitations
- 9% were harassed in other ways

What Teens Think and Do

- 40% think it's safe to respond to or chat with people they don't know
- 20% think it's safe to share personal information on a public social networking website
- 30% have considered meeting someone they have met online
- 9% 13-15 year olds have actually met face-to-face with someone they first met online

What Parents May Not Know

- 33% of teens say that their parents know little or nothing about what they do online
- 22% of teens say their parents have never discussed Internet safety with them
- 51% of parents don't know if they have software on their computers that let them monitor where their children go online

42% of parents don't monitor what their children read or type in chat rooms
95% of parents don't understand the shorthand lingo kids use in chatrooms, i.e.,
"A/S/L" (age/sex/location), or "P911" (parent over shoulder)

The obvious solution, Part 1

Talk to your high school teen about Internet safety. Make sure they understand the difference between safe and unsafe behavior online. You do it in the real world. Do it in the virtual world, too. The same basic rules apply in both places. You teach them to not talk to strangers and to not give their name, phone number, or address to strangers. And you tell them why. Explain to them that the same rules apply online and why.

Ask them to show you the Web sites they visit online. Ask them about who they chat with online. Ask them to show you their page on MySpace or other social networking sites. Ask them to show you their list of chat friends, explain who each one is, and how they know them. Remind them of the dangers of posting personal information on public Web sites where it is available to anyone.

The same research cited above indicates that teens whose parents talk to them regularly about Internet safety are far less likely to engage in unsafe online behavior. For example, 98% of all teens believed that it was safe to post their picture online before their parents talked to them about Internet safety, but once parents had talked to them about Internet safety only 25% thought it was safe to post their picture. The obvious lesson: talk to your teen about Internet safety. It makes a big difference.

The obvious solution, Part 2

In addition to talking to your high school teen, pay attention to what they are doing online. There are a number of ways to do this. One basic recommendation is to place the computer that your teen uses in a "public" area of the household, as opposed to your teen's bedroom. They are much less likely to engage in unsafe behavior if they are where you can see them.

Be informed. Learn more about the Internet and, in particular, chat rooms and social networking Web sites. Ask your teen to show you these sites so you can see how they work, so you'll have a better understanding of how they can be misused. Learn about the computer programs and technology that enable you to limit where your teen can go online. Learn how you can monitor where your teen has been on the Internet, and what they've done there. For example, your Web browser records a history of the Web sites your teen has visited. Instant messaging programs show you who they chat with. And there are programs available that let you monitor Internet activities even more closely.

The bottom line. The virtual world is probably no more dangerous or unsafe than the real world. You talk to your teen about the real world. You set rules and boundaries, and codes of acceptable behavior. And you explain why. Do the same for the virtual world. The Internet, like real life, is a wonderful place to for teens to learn, experience, and communicate. With your involvement, it won't become something else.

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