An Online Safety Guide For Parents

be

safe online

AVG
Childhood

First friends and first loves. Training wheels and learners’ permits. ABCs and college applications. Childhood is a time of discoveries, testing things out and stacking up the building blocks from initial steps to fully fledged independence.
Introduction

“Youth is wholly experimental,” said Robert Louis Stevenson, and never was that more true than today. Perhaps no generation in history has ever had more to teach their elders. But it’s still a process of trial and error – both for parents and kids. So how do we get the balance right, especially when it comes to technology?

Childhood is a different place these days. Sure, children still play in parks and parents still worry about bumps, bruises and stranger danger. Kids still get bullied at school, say unkind things that would horrify their parents, or sometimes make bad decisions. They spend too much time staring at screens - just as their parents did - and not enough time out in the fresh air. But thanks to our digitally connected society, the way all those inevitable childhood milestones occur has changed since today’s parents were youngsters. Stranger danger has taken on a new meaning. Bullying, bad behavior and poor choices are more pervasive and engage a much wider audience and exist, seemingly, forever. Much adult hand-wringing goes into whether today’s children could identify a single wild bird that’s not angry or animated.

Parenting means being more nimble, adaptable and informed than ever before. As exciting as it is, this new world poses a number of decisions and anxieties for parents. On one hand, children are benefiting enormously from new technologies. In their lifetimes, today’s kids may cure terminal illnesses, spread equality or even save the planet. If nothing else, they’re having fun. But what about the dangers lurking in the ether? And what powers do parents have to safeguard their children when the kids may have a better grasp on technology?

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Be informed

Don’t be afraid, be informed. A clear idea about the types of threats your children may encounter online is the first step to keeping them safe. Some simple groundrules can make all the difference. Knowledge is the best defense.

Unless you work in the tech industry, chances are the average teenager is more web savvy than you. Do you even know how to check your browser history? Are you aware that smartphones embed data that could identify the geographical location of every photo? Your kids might tell everyone on Facebook that you’re out of town, but if you’re uploading your vacation photos then you are too and some crafty criminals might crash the kids’ party.

Security software and parental controls are a start, but don’t expect that to be enough. For one thing, older kids may be able to work around them and youngsters may still fall for enticing - and damaging - scams.

Don’t feel overwhelmed. You don’t need to become an internet security expert - but you do need a basic awareness of the potential threats. The internet is a fraudster’s paradise, bursting with scams under every disguise.

We’ve all heard the stories of strangers looking to prey on or exploit vulnerable users. But even more prevalent is the inappropriate content - websites with sexual or violent material or ones that promote drugs or alcohol.

Whether you’re concerned about your child unintentionally striking up a friendship with an online gamer who isn’t who they seem, or worried your curious teen is stumbling onto or seeking unsuitable sites, the best defense is knowledge. And while we are prone to worry more about young children’s online experiences, the facts contradict these beliefs.

Advise your kids to never open email from strangers, download files without approval, or share passwords or personal information.

Be informed

Be Safe Online An Online Safety Guide For Parents
Be vigilant

Want an idea of what your child is sharing with the world online? Try Googling them. It’s not spying or trying to control your child’s life. A little vigilance could reassure you about the digital footprints that will follow your child in later life.

Do you know which devices in your home can connect to the internet? Is your child mature enough for a smartphone? What are they up to on their cell or game console, or, for that matter, on the home computer? What films or websites are they accessing?

Do you keep tabs on their social media profiles? Are they 13 or have they duped Facebook into giving them an account? What about other social communities like Ask.fm, where your children could be naively answering questions - innocent or otherwise - from an anonymous user?

Are you aware what your kids are revealing on Twitter or photo-sharing sites such as Instagram?

It’s not about spying or micromanaging your child’s life - though studies show up to 80% of parents using social media also monitor what their kids are posting.

But if you want an idea of what they’re sharing with the world, why not Google them. Chances are if you aren’t startled by what you find, your children are either clever enough to have safeguarded their information or they aren’t online.

Some parents set up Google Alerts to pick up any mentions of their children online. Experts even suggest parents consider buying web domain names for their children, which could prove to be a valuable piece of online real estate for them in later life.

At the very least, look at your child’s digital footprint, not only because of what it may say about them later in life but because of who else might be looking at it now.

55% of all online teens said they decided against posting content “that might reflect poorly on them in the future.” That’s great unless your child is in the other 45%.
Be an example

Who do children learn from? Their teachers. Their friends. And, yes, their parents. So teach them by setting a good example. How about putting down your smartphone at dinner for a start?

I t’s up to grown-ups to decide how much freedom to give, depending on the child’s age, maturity, self-awareness and capabilities. But what about when kids are with friends? How much of their – and your – lives are you happy for them to share with the world?

A 2011 report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project concluded that 55% of all online teens said they decided against posting content “that might reflect poorly on them in the future.” That’s great – unless your child is in the other 45%.

Every parent has experienced that stomach-churning moment when a precocious tot has blurted out something hurtful or offensive to a stranger; now imagine your child posting a ‘funny’ aside or picture that might haunt them, or you, for years to come.

And let’s not forget, parents, it’s also about you practicing self-control. Pictures or comments made by your toddlers may seem cute, but will those children feel the same way when they’re old enough to follow the Google trail of their exploits?

With a candid discussion and a few rules, you and your children might keep those embarrassing moments to a minimum.

Also insist on a limit to the time spent on the cell or in front of a screen, and practice what you preach – you can afford to relinquish your phone at dinner. You might even want to think about a new house rule: How about everyone giving up their cell phone at night, leaving them in a basket with the house keys until the next morning? It might be good for you to take a break from technology, too.

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Be smart

Malware
Malicious software that is used to disrupt how a computer operates or to gather personal data by stealth.

Spam
Bogus email messages that trick the user into clicking a link to cheap fake products or rogue software.

Denial of Service
An attack that overwhelms a website to the point where it becomes unresponsive and unavailable for other users.

Trojan
Often used by hackers as a way to access users’ computers by stealth and steal data.

Key-logger
Program that secretly records what is being typed on a computer keyboard.

Spyware
Software that secretly tracks what users are looking at online.

Phishing
Fraudulent emails or bogus websites that try to gain passwords, bank details and personal details by stealth.

Botnet
A collection of connected programs which communicate with each other to distribute spam, viruses or hack systems.

Ransomware
Malicious software that restricts access to the computer it infects - with hackers demanding payment to lift the restrictions.
These days, kids can constantly rate themselves on how many 'likes' a post or photo gets, or how many others comment - or not - illustrating the old adage about the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about.

Imagine the effects of such judgment on kids who are still forming their identities. Coupled with the constant barrage of images and messages, and even sites dedicated to self-harm, eating disorders and other damaging behavior, parents have plenty to worry about.

But experts say old-fashioned love, support, communication and attention are effective foils for today's supersized pressures. A 2008 Harvard study says “a positive home environment inoculates youth against a host of dangers,” adding that “family cohesion and shared activities led to less exposure to negative content such as pornography.”

Keeping the screen in the heart of the house, or reserving the right to browse your child’s laptop at any time, might help, too. Take an interest in what your kids are doing. Get involved. In the real world, you may not understand anything about soccer, but you still go to your kid’s games. It’s no different with technology.

Most of all, keep the conversation open and let them know you will listen, without judging. It’s normal for teens to be secretive, moody and insecure - weren’t you? But if they seem unusually anxious or withdrawn, try to have a chat; it’s probably nothing, but they may be uncomfortable or upset with something that’s happened online and need some advice.

Be available
Old-fashioned virtues like love and attention are all the more valuable when children are growing up surrounded by a world of online comments, social thumbs up and thumbs down. So keep the real-world conversation open with your kids.
Be good citizens

The internet can be a world of temptation. Why pay for music or movies when you can download them illegally, right? It’s up to parents to make sure children know that real-world laws and right and wrong still apply online.

There’s an old saying that’s more applicable than ever: handsome is as handsome does. In other words, no matter what physical attributes one’s blessed with - or is able to acquire through the magic of Photoshop – it’s still about kindness, consideration, honesty, integrity and good manners.

Children too timid to make mean remarks to a classmate’s face are emboldened by the anonymity of the internet, and your garden-variety bullies are even worse. Others pile on, the comments heaping up like a pack of varsity linebackers going for a loose ball. Parents need to take a firm stance if there’s any suggestion of cyberbullying, and be aware that their child could be on the giving or receiving end. It’s no one else’s responsibility to police what children are doing online.

And that’s without the truly chilling thought of your daughter sharing intimate photos with a boyfriend, who then circulates them to every guy he knows...or doesn’t know. Fortunately, that seems to be a fairly rare occurrence, but there are plenty of other unsavory habits most kids will giddily get up to:

In an AVG study of 22,000 mums, 16% said their children had experienced unpleasant or aggressive behavior online

Why pay for music or movies when you can download it for free? Attribution?
What’s the internet for if not to let someone else’s work serve as your own?

You may expect kids to know these things are wrong, but let’s not forget what kids are like. They - we - have probably all had light fingers, or sneaked a cigarette or watched/listened to/taken credit for something they shouldn’t have. It bears reminding that if they wouldn’t do or say it in real life, they should at least think twice before hiding behind the cover of the internet.
Be ready

1. **Stay informed**
   Keep up to date on the kinds of things your child may be interested in. For both younger kids and teens, that means learning about social sites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as virtual communities like Club Penguin and Webkinz.

2. **Keep the computer in a common room**
   This is a bit of social engineering. By keeping everything out in the open, you reduce the chance of activity that might be suspect.

3. **The internet is forever**
   What we put online tends to remain there, for anyone to search and find. So it’s important to tell our kids, especially our teens, that they need to think carefully about what they put in their profiles, on message boards, etc.

4. **Remember the four Ps**
   Following on the previous tip, teach your kids about the four Ps: parents, principles, predators, or the police. Never post anything online that any of those four shouldn’t see.

5. **Use restrictive security settings**
   It isn’t made plain how best to go about protecting yourself on Facebook and similar sites, but it’s extremely important to control what information you share with the world.
It’s OK

There’s really never been a better time to be a child. Take all the joy, fascination and freedom of childhood and add the endless possibilities that technology promises - who wouldn’t want to be a kid in the 21st century?

This goes for you, too, parents. We may be navigating new territory, but that doesn’t have to signal trepidation. It’s all part of the fun.

Learn more about internet security at www.avg.com