



The most important thing you can do is *teach* your children appropriate use of computers and cell phones. Make sure they know to tell you if they receive an inappropriate message or photo. There are other ways to help limit your child's access to Web sites and computer use:

- Take advantage of free parental controls and spam blockers provided by your Internet service provider. Set your search engine's preferences to "strict filtering" to avoid inappropriate content.
- Bookmark appropriate sites for your children to visit and make a rule that these are the only sites they can visit online. If they want to visit a new site, they must check with you first.
- Teach your children to use a kid-friendly search engine like Yahoo!igans. Find out what search engine they use at school.
- Limit your children's online time to one hour or less a day.
- As your children move into the tween and teen years, consider adding monitoring software. Monitoring software allows you to view the sites your children are visiting and also allows you to review chat sessions and comments they are posting on social-networking sites. You can also view the history of sites visited. (Children often learn how to delete this information, however.)
- Discuss what information is appropriate to share online and what information is too private or personal. Make sure your children know to avoid posting their phone number, cell phone number, date of birth, or home address on Web sites or instant messages.

- Make rules about sharing and sending photos. Younger children should only do this with your permission. Discuss whom children can share photos with and what types of photos are appropriate. If your children are posting photos on a social-networking site, make sure that they use a privacy feature that only allows their friends to view their photographs.
- Make sure children know to keep their password private.
- Online friends should be friends in the real world. Friends on their buddy lists and social-networking sites should be people they know, rather than friends of friends.
- Keep the computer in a central place where you can observe what your children are doing. Computers and laptops should not be in bedrooms if they have Internet capability.
- Install antivirus software on your computer and keep it up-to-date. Use a firewall for protection. Children are notorious for downloading games and applications from Web sites that may include harmful viruses. Make sure you back up files regularly.
- Teach your children how to communicate appropriately in cyberspace. Explain how easy it is for messages to be misinterpreted online. Discuss the golden rule as it applies to cyberspace. Stress to your children: "If you wouldn't want someone to say that to you, don't send it in a message." Discuss how easily rumors get started online and the importance of avoiding gossip. Teach your children how to be rumor blockers (don't pass it on) rather than rumor starters. Remind them not to respond to a message if they are feeling angry or upset. It's okay to respond after they have calmed down.
- Respect the minimum age guidelines of social-networking sites. Do not allow your children to lie about their age to bypass the age limits. If you are willing to let your children have profiles on social-networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook, set them up together. Emphasize how important it is for you to know their passwords.
- Search the Internet for your children's names, screen names, phone numbers, and address regularly to see what pops up. Teach them the importance of building a positive online reputation for the future, as employers and colleges may search for information about them online.