

Keeping Young People Safe Online: Establish Understanding

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Over the past few years, I have consulted on a number of education and awareness programs designed to help caring adults manage the risks that their kids face online. Working with clients as diverse and as prominent as Microsoft and the Girl Scouts, we wrestled with questions that perhaps you have asked yourself: how do I keep young people safe from the predators lurking online; from the devastation of cyber bullying; from stumbling onto pornography, hate, or violence; or just from wasting hours every day on inane web sites and silly chats with “friends?”

Commonly, caring adults’ visceral reaction may be just to take the computer away. After all, the risks may seem huge and the technology may seem foreign. However, keeping kids offline isn’t only impractical; it can be detrimental (more on this in a minute). A far more reasonable response is to maintain leadership over a child’s online life. Does it sound impossible? Not at all—I bet you’ll find that you can accomplish a lot—and do it more easily than you may imagine.



Today’s message begins with an oddly controversial point: kids are doing great stuff online. Really and truly. Like what? Well, let’s start with the basics...

Kids can manage relationships online really well. Yeah sure, mean kids are mean online. Likewise, however, nice kids generally are nice online. If you know a nice kid—and most of us do—chances are that online he or she is supporting, encouraging, consoling, and having a great time with other nice kids. Moreover, the web helps young people feel an online connection and camaraderie when they might feel otherwise isolated from family or “real” friends, for example, after they move, or if they are homebound with an injury or disability. It is absolutely true that face-to-face interactions are vital, but the web really can enhance those, as well.

Kids can organize their lives online. Contact lists, calendars, alarms, banking—even young adolescents are using these key instruments of organization in ways that most of us adults learned in college if not later, and caring adults can help them learn how to do so more safely and effectively.

Kids connect with others on things that interest them. The web makes it possible to connect with interesting others almost instantly. This helps kids go deeper a lot faster and potentially to find a more like-minded set of peers. My nine-year-old-son collects, of all things, vintage cameras. Without the web, I promise he would think he was the only kid in the world who knows that “Diana” isn’t just a princess and “Brownie” isn’t always a sweet treat. As always, though, it remains vital for caring adults to monitor where kids go online and with whom they visit, and to emphasize online safety rules.

Kids can learn a lot. Can you even remember when a school research paper meant going to the library—remember the card catalogue?

Tremendous information is now available at the touch of a button, and you can interact with the information in ways that make it so much easier to learn and understand. And, most of this information is accurate, helpful, and about things that you won’t mind your kids learning! Granted, young people (and adults) now need better training and differentiating between sources, but that is the subject for another time. More immediately, I know first-hand, for example, that the interactive United States maps available online have my fifth grader acing geography in ways that paper and pencil preparation simply wouldn’t have achieved.

Kids can improve their writing skills. A 2009 U.K. study found that, in sweeping ways, computer use makes kids better writers. Why? Well, at the very least, kids are doing a lot more writing these days: 75 percent of teen study participants said that they write regularly, and 61 percent have a blog. Moreover, writing in the social context or blogging means writing for a real purpose, so it is no surprise that 45 percent of study participants said that they enjoy writing. And, the computer makes it a lot easier for teens to perfect their writing; 89 percent said that writing with a computer enables them to correct mistakes more easily.

All together, kids are using the web in ways that are productive. Caring adults can continue to protect and support them by understanding this position. From this vantage point, we are in a far better position to exert limitations and offer guidance on the admittedly very real risk associated with a young online life.

Let me close with an apt comparison: Are there risks to driving a car? You bet, but most of us acknowledge that—with guidance—the benefits can outweigh the risks. From that perspective, we thus manage drivers’ education thoughtfully and productively. So, too, it is with the Internet.