Keeping Children Safe on the Internet: Guidelines for Parents

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More than 30 million children in the United States use the Internet on a regular basis (*Online Risks for Youth*, n.d.) and often they are better at using the Internet than are their parents and teachers (*Child Safety Online,* n.d.). However, the Internet can be very dangerous. While access to the Internet can provide children with important learning experiences, it also exposes them to risks not encountered in the "real world." Sexual predators can easily use it to locate children to sexually molest. In fact, the results of a recent national survey indicated that one in five youth is sexually solicited over the Internet annually (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000).

This is very disturbing given the fact that sexual abuse is very harmful to children's development. Children who are sexually victimized often experience high levels of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, relationship problems, and suicidal ideation. Because sexual abuse is so harmful, laws have been established to protect children from sexual predators. However, the Internet makes it difficult to protect children because it provides access to large numbers of children and allows the sexual predator to remain anonymous (Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, & Dickson, 2004).

For example, a pedophile would have difficulty entering a schoolyard disguised as a child, but could easily pretend to be a child in an online chat room. Strangers also can access children online through e-mail and instant messaging. Moreover, technology (e.g., sniffers, Trojan and worm programs) is currently available that enables sexual predators to invade home computers and gather personal information about an unsuspecting youth (see Dombrowski & Gischlar, 2005 for a more detailed discussion of this technology).

Strategies for Internet Safety

Given the potential dangers of children's Internet usage, the following suggestions for addressing Internet safety in the home are offered for parents.

1. Establish a parent-child Internet use contract (see attached contract).
2. Explain to older children and adolescents the potential hazards of online sexual solicitation and the risks associated with Internet communication with strangers. Younger children may not need as detailed a discussion, but should be cautioned about the dangers of talking to people they do not know.
3. Discuss the dangers of face-to-face contact with someone met online
4. Teach your child to avoid sending personally identifying information (e.g., real name, address, school, telephone number, photos, family member names) via the Internet.
5. Install a firewall (e.g., Norton Personal Firewall), privacy filtration software (e.g., Net Nanny5), anti-adware/spyware (e.g., Ad-Aware), and an antivirus program (e.g., Norton antivirus).
6. Encrypt your wireless home network.
7. Discourage your child from downloading games and other media which could contain Trojan and worm programs that enable remote access to computers by unauthorized users.
8. Supervise/monitor Internet friends in a fashion similar to how neighborhood and school friends are monitored.

9. Monitor the amount of time your child spends online and frequently check the computer's Web browsers, which provide information on the websites that have been accessed.
10. Set the Internet browser (e.g., Internet Explorer) security feature to "high."
11. Understand and approve children's screen names—predators target sexually suggestive screen names.
12. Place computer in a public location such as a den as opposed to a child's bedroom.
13. Contact the *Cyber Tip Line* at (800)-843-5678 or www.cybertipline.com if you suspect an online predator has contacted your child.

Because there is great potential for sexual predators to solicit youth via the Internet, there is a need for greater awareness regarding how to protect our children from this crime. This can be achieved through increased education about the potential risks of Internet use and by emphasizing the need to monitor children's online activities.

Parent-Child Contract for Internet Safety

I, _____, have read this contract with my mother/father _____ and I understand the rules of Internet use in my home. I also understand that these same rules apply whenever I access the Internet outside of my home, such as at school, the library, or a friend's house. I will keep this contract clearly posted by my computer. If I should run into any problems while surfing the Internet or while in a chat room, I will contact my parents and abide by the rules listed in this contract.

Child's Responsibilities:

- I will never give out my home telephone number or address over the Internet.
- I will not give out any information about my family, such as where my parents work and the names of my brothers or sisters.
- I will not use my real name in chat rooms and will always use a "nickname."
- I will not tell a stranger on the Internet where I go to school.
- I will never meet someone I have talked to on the Internet unless my parents approve and come with me to the meeting.
- I will never send pictures of my family or me over the Internet without my parents' permission.
- I will not open email or download files from strangers.
- I will not talk to anyone over the Internet who makes me feel uncomfortable; I will tell my parents right away when this happens.
- I will tell my parents if anyone is threatening me or using bad language.
- I will always keep in mind while talking to people on the Internet that they are strangers and some strangers can be bad.
- I will obey my parents' rules about being on the Internet, including obtaining their permission to sign on and download material.
- I will abide by these rules whenever I use the Internet, even if I am not at home.

Parents' Responsibilities:

- I _____ will supervise my child while he or she is on the Internet to ensure they are using this tool responsibly and not endangering themselves by communicating inappropriately with strangers they may meet over the Internet.
- I will not use this contract as a way to control every action taken by my child on the Internet.

- I will respect my child's need for a degree of privacy while speaking to friends on the Internet.
- I will spend time with my child and learn about what interests him or her on the Internet.
- I will be aware of the procedure for contacting my online provider for advice should someone appear to be bothering my child. I will also contact the Cyber Tip Line at (800)-843-5678 or *www.cybertipline.com* if I suspect someone has been soliciting my child for sex or sending pornographic material to my child.
- I will teach my child to use judgment while online and I will ensure that my child is educated about the hazards of Internet use and how to safely use the Internet.

Parent's Signature _____
Date_____

Child's Signature _____
Date _____

Resources

Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K. J., & Wolak, J. (2000). *Online victimization: A report on the nation's youth.* Alexandria, VA: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, (2000). *Use of computers in the sexual exploitation of children.*Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Online risks for youth. (n.d.). Retrieved May 8, 2004, from *www.netsmartz.org/parents/home/rskinfo.html*

Adapted and modified from Dombrowski, S. C., LeMasney, J. W., Ahia, C. E., & Dickson, S. A. (2004). Protecting children from online sexual predators: Technological, psychoeducational, and legal considerations. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 35, 65-73.*Copyright © 2004 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.*