Avoiding Dangers When Your Kids Are Using Screen Media

by Kathy Slattengren

Are your kids staying safe online? Digital technology has made keeping your kids safe increasingly more difficult. When your kids are on their digital devices, you may be unaware of who they are communicating with and what they are doing.

With the help of digital devices, your children can be seriously misbehaving in your own home and you may be completely ignorant of it.   Prior to digital technology, it was unlikely that your pre-teen kids would be breaking the law without you noticing anything. Now some parents are getting a rude awakening when the police show up at their door because their children have committed a felony online!

Getting Into Serious Trouble

If your children have access to computers, connected video games or cellphones, they are a click away from committing a crime. Most children do not understand just how legally serious their online actions may be.

For example, kids have faced felony charges for cyberbullying. What starts out to be a prank or teasing can lead to serious consequences. Sometimes kids post problematic content under their own accounts and sometimes they use someone else's account. Both situations have led to legal action.

Most social media platforms have a minimum age of 13. If children are younger than 13 and lie to get an account, they are still liable for whatever they do online.

Some kids are also breaking the child pornography laws by sending nude or nearly nude images of themselves to others. They can also be in legal trouble if they forward on nude images they receive to others. It's important to talk to your kids about the issues around sexting.

Kids also fall into the trap of trusting someone who is trying to take advantage of them. Pedophiles and others who want to take advantage of kids know how to manipulate them. They may convince your kids to share compromising information with them and then use this as blackmail against them.

Monitoring Your Children's Use of Digital Technology

Your job of keeping your kids safe online is a tough one! It's hard to provide guidance to your children if you don't know what they are doing.

Your children have many ways to access the internet – computers, cellphones, iPads, tablets, handheld games and video game consoles. When you think about how to keep your kids safe, you first need to consider how they access the internet.

These tools and approaches can help your kids have healthy tech use:

- Monitoring software, parental control software
- Software that only allows access to a limited set of predefined web sites
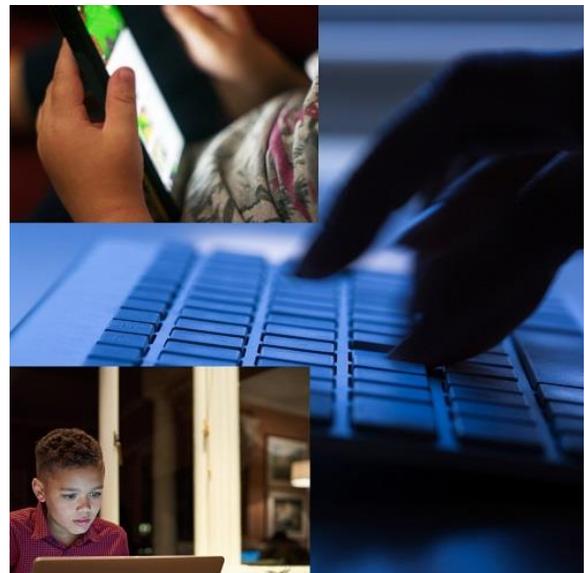
- Parental approval required for any new web sites

Monitoring software is by its nature historical. It doesn't prevent children from making poor decisions online. It alerts you to what has already been done. While monitoring software can provide helpful information about what your children are doing online, you still need to play a large role in helping your children think before they click.

You can help yourself out by establishing rules like no TV or computers in your children's bedrooms. Have them turn their cellphones in at night too so that they aren't busy texting when they should be sleeping!

Helping Kids Think Before They Click

Teaching children to think ahead to possible consequences isn't easy. Thinking through consequences before acting is rather sophisticated for children whose brains aren't fully developed until their mid-20's! The prefrontal cortex which is responsible for thinking through consequences is one of the last areas to completely develop.

Plan to have multiple small discussions with your children on their use of digital technology. News stories can be a great source of conversation. Listen carefully to their thoughts and ideas to gain a better understanding on the depth of their thinking.

It's important to cover topics like:

- Anything entered on the internet or shared via texting is permanent and traceable.
- Be careful about revealing personal information.
- Post only things you'd be happy for your grandparents, teachers and college admission counselors to see.
- Let us know if anything seems odd or bothers you when online.
- Ask for approval before downloading anything.
- When online, people can lie about things like their age and gender. They can post other people's pictures and claim it is them.

Carefully consider when you feel your child is ready to handle the additional responsibility of a digital device or web site. If in doubt, delay it until they are older and more mature.

Kathy Slattengren is an internationally recognized, inspirational parent educator and founder of Priceless Parenting, http://www.PricelessParenting.com. Priceless Parenting offers online parenting classes, parenting presentations and parent coaching. Parents learn to effectively handle misbehavior while building loving relationships.

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