Online Safety for Children

Millions of people are now using the internet, "The Information Highway" for shopping, exchanging electronic mail, surfing the World Wide Web and joining in chat groups as well as many other online activities. With all of this technology, how do you protect your children?

Internet Service Providers (ISP's) and the various online services generally do everything they can to insure their subscribers have an enjoyable, safe online experience. However, it is not possible for them to police their entire subscriber base. It is up to the individual to behave in a way that is safe and appropriate. The online world, like the rest of the world is made up of a wide array of people. While most are decent and respectful, there are those rude, insulting, obnoxious and even exploitative people that prey on the trust and curiosity of children. Children need parental supervision and common-sense advice on how to keep their "cyberspace" experiences happy, healthy and productive.

Some of the risks that children may encounter are:

- **Exposure to Inappropriate Material** - Child may be exposed to material that is sexual, hateful, or violent, or encourages activities that are dangerous or illegal. Most of this occurs when trying to find information via search engines. Most search engines, do not filter material but may offer a child-safe option. There are also other tools available such as filtering programs available.

- **Physical Molestation** - Child might provide too much information or arrange a meeting that could jeopardize his/her safety or the safety of his/her family members. In a few cases, pedophiles have used e-mail or chat areas to gain a child's confidence and then arrange a face-to-face meeting.

- **Harassment** - Child might encounter e-mail or chat room acquaintances that are harassing, demeaning or belligerent.

- **Legal and Financial** - Child could give out a parent's credit card number or do something that violates another person's rights.

How can parents reduce these risks? While respecting children's' privacy, parents should stay involved and supervise their child's internet activities. Get to know their "online" friends just as you get to know all of their other friends. Remember, if you feel uncomfortable or feel you have reason for concern, talk to your child. As in the real world, open communication is key to successful parenting. If your child tells you about an upsetting online experience, don't blame him/her but help him/her avoid problems in the future. How you respond will determine whether they choose to confide in you the next time or decide to handle it on their own.

By taking responsibility for your children's online computer use, parents can greatly minimize any potential risks of being online. Make it a family rule to:

1. **Never give out identifying information in a public message**. This includes name, home address, school name, telephone number, age, marital status, photographs of children or financial status.
2. **Look at and get to know the sites your child uses**. Have your child show you what he/she does online. Familiarize yourself with the Internet and find other safe sites for your child to use. For more safety information and other kid-safe sites visit www.GetNetWise.org.
3. **Never allow a child to set up a face-to-face meeting with an online acquaintance without parental permission.** Discuss the dangers involved with such a meeting. If a meeting is arranged, be certain it is in a public place and only with parental supervision.
4. **Never respond to anything that is suggestive, obscene, threatening or makes you feel uncomfortable.** Encourage your children to inform you if they have any such encounter. If you or your child experience any of these situations, forward a copy to your ISP asking for assistance. You may also contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline at 1-800-843-5678 or www.missingkids.com if you or your child receive messages or images that are obscene, lewd, filthy or indecent with an intent to harass, abuse, annoy or threaten or if you come across any child pornography while online.
5. **Remember that people online may not be who they seem.** Because you don't see or hear them, the person can easily misrepresent himself/herself. For example, a person identifying himself as a "14-year-old girl" could actually be a 45-year-old man.
6. **If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.** Be leery of any offers that want you to come to a meeting, have someone come to your home, or send cash or credit card information. As a general rule, if you haven't initiated the offer, don't respond with your private information.
7. **Don't let the computer and online services become your babysitter.** Set guidelines for the amount of time your child can spend on the computer. If a child is spending too much time on the Internet or online services, especially late at night, this could be an indication of a potential problem.
8. **Check out blocking and filtering software and be sure to check Internet ratings.** While this will help give you some peace of mind, the best way to assure that your children will have a positive online experience is to communicate with them and spend time with them while they are online.

A few minutes spent in discussion with your child plus a few precautionary measures could be the difference between a positive or unpleasant or even dangerous online experience.