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Keep an eye on kids' Internet use

American children and their families race onto the Internet's "information superhighway" in ever increasing numbers. Powerful computers and high-speed Internet access provide entry to a world of information and communication unimaginable a decade ago.

Computer literacy has become a necessity, with the majority of jobs now requiring computer skills and technical know-how. In addition, children and their parents are eager to immerse themselves in the sea of information available in the comfort and safety of their homes.

It is very important that parents develop an understanding of this innovative technology, because in addition to all its benefits, there are many dangers associated with being online. Being able to surf the Internet in the privacy of your living room may lull many into a false sense of security.

Sharing information on the Internet is the same as sharing information with the world. Web sites offering chat rooms and services that encourage children to provide very personal information and identifying characteristics including addresses, pictures and phone numbers are plentiful.

Through viruses and 'cookies,' strangers may be able to access to your confidential files and to trace personal activities. As iPods and phones become more computer-like, they too become susceptible to the similar invasions.

Children using the Internet are targets for marketing and solicitation of all types, including pornography, racism, violence, gambling, and child molestation. The simple misspelling of Web addresses and search terms frequently leads to sites that prey on the innocent and unwary. Studies have shown that at least 25 percent of children find unwanted pornography. Many child abductions begin online, with more than 700 children abducted in 2004.

As with any potentially dangerous environment, it is essential that parents understand this technology, exert appropriate influence over their child and

set standards for Internet use. Access to and independent use of computers will depend on the child's age and maturity, but some general suggestions can be made:

- Admit that your children may have a far better understanding of computer technology. Seek out information, learn, and close the knowledge gap. Try making it a group project and get your kids to teach you what they know.
- Exert parental control. Keep the computer in a family location, rather than the child's bedroom, to ensure that activity can be observed. Consider filtering devices that limit Internet access and monitor where your child is surfing.
- Inform and frequently remind your children that they are in public when they surf the Internet. Educate them about the danger associated with the sharing of confidential and identifying information, including pictures, phone numbers, school, and address.
- Warn them about the personal danger of meeting anyone they interact with online and obtain assurance that they will not meet anyone. Make certain that children understand that the Internet friend who says he is 14, could in reality be an adult.
- Keep communication channels open and encourage children to talk about their Internet activity and share anything that they find upsetting or confusing.
- Diversify their activity. Limit screen time (including television and computer games) to no more than two hours per day.

Technology and the Internet have the ability to enrich our lives. Parental influence and limit-setting is necessary, as there are inherent dangers. Children need continuous supervision to both protect them and to optimize their experiences.

If you have questions regarding this, or any other parenting issue, contact your pediatrician. Feel free to contact me at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Ave., Salem, MA, 01907 or at ebailey@aap.org with your questions or comments.

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