

Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens: Helping Young People Learn to Use the Internet Safely and Responsibly

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Chapter 21. ON THE NET, WHAT YOU DO REFLECTS ON YOU Core Values and Standards Online

The previous four chapters discussed key issues that affect the ability of children and teens to make safe and responsible choices online. As has already been discussed, parents should not expect younger children to independently make safe and responsible choices and must “hold their hand” by using controlled access and communications to ensure that their Internet use is safer. This chapter provides guidance on specific strategies that parents can use while their children are younger, and especially as their children move into the teen years, to encourage the values and standards necessary to support safe and responsible online choices.

The Challenge

Young people do not have sufficient brain development to independently and consistently make safe and responsible choices—but it is essential that they practice making these choices to develop the capacity to do so. When young people use the Internet, the lack of tangible feedback can interfere with their ability to understand the consequences of their online actions, and the perception of invisibility and online social norms may create an environment in which they are less attentive to risks, values, or the potential of detection. Further, there are powerful social influence factors in operation online that could be used to inappropriately influence young people to make unsafe or irresponsible choices. And children who are already more “at risk” are more vulnerable online.

Laying the groundwork for your child to independently engage in safe and responsible online behavior starts in the “real world” with a strong focus on imparting values and standards, and decision-making strategies that are likely to reinforce those values and standards.

- Focus your child’s attention on the reasons for the values and standards you have established. Actions that violate the values or standards can cause harm to yourself or others. The primary focus must be on the benefits that following those values and standards will achieve or the potential harm those values and standards seek to avoid. These can be expressed both in the positive and the negative. “Treat others with respect because they will be more inclined to treat

you with respect.” “Don’t [describe action] because you could harm someone by [describe the possible harmful impact].” By focusing on the reasons for the values and standards, you can help your child better internalize those values and standards.

- Help your child learn to do what is right in accord with his or her own personal values and standards and your family’s values and standards—regardless of the potential for detection and punishment. Shift your focus away from rules and threats of punishments to an emphasis on values and standards, the reasons for those values and standards, and the importance of acting in accord with values and standards at all times. The message “Don’t do this because it is against the rule” has limited impact when children perceive they are invisible and their actions will not be detected or punished.
- Help your child understand how actions can cause harm to people they cannot see by helping him or her learn to gain the perspective of unseen others. Whenever you are discussing situations involving other people, especially those who are not present, ask your child, “How do you think that person might feel?” This will help your child gain greater skills in predicting probable consequences and feelings of others.
- Help your child learn to use ethical decision-making guidelines when faced with a situation that calls for a decision to be made about responsible online actions. Questions that encourage a focus on ethical values and standards include
 - Is this kind and respectful to others?
 - How would I feel if someone did the same thing to me, or to my best friend?
 - What would my mom, dad, or other trusted adult think or do?
 - Would I violate any agreements, rules, or laws?
 - How would I feel if my actions were reported on the front page of a newspaper?
 - What would happen if everybody did this?
 - Would it be okay if I did this in person, or in the “real world?”
 - How would this action reflect on me?
- Help your child learn to identify rationalizations as excuses for irresponsible behavior. Listen carefully for these common rationalizations when your child attempts to explain or excuse unsafe or irresponsible behavior. Identify the rationalizations for what they are.
- Make sure that your child knows the challenges of making a safe or responsible decision when emotionally upset. Explain this in terms of brain processing. A decision made when angry or emotionally upset is highly likely to be the wrong decision. A helpful guideline is “If you are mad or sad, keep your fingers off the keyboard.”

- Challenge the unhealthy values and standards that are raised as you go about your life in the “real world.” Our children and teens are constantly being bombarded with extremely harmful messages—frequently through advertising and entertainment media. Parents must constantly be aware of and challenge these unhealthy values and standards. The fact that advertisers and the entertainment industry are trying to convince your child that the only acceptable standard for girls is to be skinny, cute, and sexually attractive to boys and the only acceptable standard for boys is to be strong, virile, and sexually attractive to girls does not mean that these are the values that your child must accept.

If I Can Do It Online, It Must Be Okay

Some young people view the Internet as a vehicle that supports anarchy—“If I can do it online, it must be okay.” There are some important external sources of limits on online behavior that should be emphasized to your child. These include family values, religious or spiritual values, school rules, terms of use agreements, civil law standards, and criminal laws. All of these external sources of limits are quite consistent in regards to what is considered responsible and irresponsible behavior.

Ultimately, the most important limit is your child’s internalized personal values. The teen years are the time when your child is developing internalized personal values that he or she will use to guide decision making throughout the rest of life. Paying attention to your child’s internalization of values is probably your most important job during his or her teen years.

The “Parent-Teen Internet Use Agreement” in Appendix A is based on values and standards. The approach seeks to emphasize to your child that these are not simply “Internet safety rules” that they are supposed to follow. This agreement is all about honoring one’s personal values and standards.

Family Values

What are your family’s values? Make a commitment to live in accord with these values and teach these values to your child. Emphasize to your child repeatedly that your family’s values should guide all online activity. The following are some possible family values that relate to Internet risks and concerns. They are presented in terms of both the value and the contrary online social norm.

- Personal privacy—when others seek to know all or encourage you to tell all
- Respect—when others condone or encourage disrespect of others
- Modesty and restraint—when others flaunt promiscuous sexuality
- Responsible consumption—when others promote excessive consumption and the need to have it all

- Peaceful resolution of conflict—when others glorify, promote, or resort to violence
- Hard work—when others promise a “free lunch”
- Self-protection—when others encourage taking risks
- Care and concern—when others glorify “me first”
- Search for truth—when others seek to mislead and coerce
- Balance—when others promote excess
- Responsible behavior—when it might appear that cheaters win

Religious or Spiritual Values

Religious and spiritual teachings can be used as a basis for judging whether or not an action is considered to be appropriate. The world’s primary religions or spiritual traditions all endorse a version of the “Golden Rule”—treat others as you want to be treated.

If your family is strongly religious or spiritual, an extension of the work done to complete the “Parent-Teen Internet Use Agreement” would be to discuss the specific religious or spiritual standards that apply to the Internet risks and concerns. This is also an exercise that could be done within a religious or spiritual youth group meeting. This would combine the power of reliance on religious or spiritual teachings with peer pressure—a potent social influence strategy that combines the influences of authority, social proof, and commitment and consistency.

School Rules

When students use the Internet at school or through the school district Internet system, even if accessed from home, they have an obligation to follow the rules set forth by the school in the school’s Internet use agreement. School policies are set forth as “rules.” Remember, an important component of your strategy is to ensure that your child understands the reasons for the rules. Take the time to review the Internet use agreement for your child’s school, and for each rule, ask your child to describe the reason for that rule.

Terms of Use Agreements

Internet service providers, Web sites, and cell phone companies place controls on the material and communications transmitted through their technologies or posted on their sites. The sites all have a document that is referred to as “Terms and Conditions,” “Terms of Use” or simply “Terms” that outlines the agreement between the site and

users. Generally, terms of use agreements prohibit harmful speech, other actions that do or could harm others, copyright infringement, violating someone's privacy, and the like.

When your child registers on a new site, take the time to download the terms of use agreement and review its provisions with him or her. This is a good way to reinforce that your family's values and your expectations for your child's online behavior are similar to the rules that have also been established by the site. Take the time to discuss the reasons for the provisions in the terms of use agreements and note how similar these provisions are to your family's values.

Civil Law Standards

There are several civil law standards related to some types of irresponsible online behavior that are important for you and your child to be aware of. Your child should understand that parents can be sued if their children engage in truly harmful online activities, including copyright infringement, cyberbullying, and computer security violations. This knowledge should guide your child's online decision making. It is also important for you to understand that if someone truly harms your child online, litigation to recover financial damages and to stop the harmful actions is possible.

Parents can be held liable for the harm caused by their minor child under the theory of negligent supervision. In some jurisdictions, specific laws provide that parents are legally responsible for acts of intentional harm caused by their minor child. The fact that parents can be held liable for harmful actions of their children is one reason why parents should make it their business to know what their child is doing online. The civil law standards outline an important "line in the sand" for what our society considers highly inappropriate.

The legal standards that apply to harmful online speech and activities include:

- Defamation—publishing a false statement that damages someone's reputation
- Invasion of privacy—publicly disclosing information about another person's private life or affairs, when the effect would be highly offensive to a reasonable person
- Intentional infliction of emotional distress—intentionally or recklessly engaging in actions that are outrageous and intolerable and have caused extreme distress
- Copyright infringement—downloading copyrighted material, generally entertainment media
- Computer security violations—causing damage, generally financial, by engaging in a security intrusion of a computer system (also a violation of criminal law)

Criminal Laws

Countries and jurisdictions have laws that could be applied to cases involving online harmful actions. Common criminal laws that could involve online actions include the following:

- Making threats of violence to people or their property
- Engaging in extortion or coercion—trying to force someone to do something they don't want to do
- Making obscene or harassing telephone calls, which also includes text messaging
- Harassment or stalking
- Hate or bias-based crimes
- Gang-related activity
- Creating or disseminating material considered “harmful to minors” or child pornography
- Sexual exploitation
- Taking a photo image of someone in place where privacy is expected
- Sale of an illegal item or substance
- Computer security violations

Teachable Moments

A “teachable moment” is any situation that provides you with an opportunity to impart information to your child related to values, standards, and decision-making strategies. A teachable moment is a door that opens, sometimes very briefly, that can allow you to more casually influence the development of ethical values and effective problem-solving skills. Be continuously on the look out for these moments to discuss issues related to online risks and concerns.

A teachable moment may emerge when your child engages in a new online activity. For example, if your child wants to find some information or a new site online and you are conducting a search, the process of analyzing the search returns provides a teachable moment to discuss safe searching strategies. The process of reviewing the site to determine whether or not it meets your family's standards can provide a teachable moment to discuss a wide range of issues, including the appropriateness of certain

online activities and the kinds of advertising and other commercial-related activities evident on the site. Registering on a new site provides a teachable moment to discuss privacy protection in the context of site registrations, to discuss making smart choices with respect to agreeing to receive commercial advertisements, and to review the “Terms of Use” agreement.

A teachable moment may also arise when you have to make a difficult decision in the “real world”—especially one involving an ethical dilemma. It can be very helpful for a child to witness your thinking and your actions when presented with a situation in which you have to choose between right and wrong. Talk about these situations with your child, explore your own thought processes regarding ethical decision making, and ask his or her opinion.

Often teachable moments related to Internet risks and concerns will emerge in the context of some form of news or entertainment media. Pay close attention to any news stories about issues related to Internet risks and concerns. It is strongly recommended that you subscribe to *NetFamilyNews*, a weekly email newsletter that provides insight into current events related to children, families, and the Internet, at <http://netfamilynews.org>. This newsletter will significantly increase your awareness of news stories that can serve as teachable moments. You can say to your child, “I saw an article today that addressed concerns of [describe story]. What do you think? How would you handle this kind of a situation?”

Be especially attuned to any comments that your child might make about what has happened online. Your child may want to discuss an online event with you, but may not be sure how you are going to respond. In general, many young people are very afraid of an adult overreaction to any discussion about online activities, particularly a discussion related to online activities of potential parental concern. The response to any subtle comment about a witnessed online event should be equivalently subtle, but seek to continue the dialogue so that you can learn more about the situation and turn your discussion into a teachable moment.

Very significant teachable moments are any time that your child has had a bad experience online or if you feel it necessary to place restrictions on Internet use due to inappropriate behavior. A bad experience or the need to remedy the harm caused by a bad choice provides an opportunity for your child to learn why what happened was not appropriate and to use this knowledge to avoid making the same mistake in the future. This is precisely the way that we grow and learn. But this kind of teachable moment can only be effective if your child thoroughly understands what was wrong, why it was wrong, and how to make better choices in the future.

Teachable moments provide the opportunity to practice effective value-based problem-solving techniques. Here are some problem-solving questions:

- What is the situation? What issues does this situation raise? What are the risks and concerns? What values are implicated? Who is involved and what are their

personal interests? Does anyone involved in the situation appear to be inappropriately trying to influence someone else? What are the possible actions and the possible outcomes for each of these actions? If there is a conflict between good choices or if there are only difficult choices, which choice has the greatest possibility in leading to the best possible outcome for all concerned?

- If discussing a situation that has occurred, what choices were made, by whom, and why? What was the outcome and was this outcome good or bad? What other choices were possible and what were the possible outcomes of those choices? Why might one of those other choices have been better or worse?