

INFORMATION

from Focus on the Family

Internet Safety Building Character and Building Walls

The Internet provides both tremendous opportunities and challenges for families today. Children can now easily find information on anything imaginable. Extended families separated by distance can close the gap by using the Internet to swap pictures and e-mail. However, the Internet is not without its problems, and your discernment will be required to use it wisely for your family.

Despite laws prohibiting the spread of obscene material online, the Internet is awash in illegal and undesirable material, much of which can find its way to your home computer. The Justice Department estimates that 9 in 10 school-age children have been or will be exposed to pornography online, most while doing homework. Further, 47 percent of children with email receive pornographic spam on a daily basis. Even children with no Internet service at home are affected by access in school, libraries and friends' homes.

The good news is that parents can take advantage of the protections offered by new technologies. However, parents must also be aware that even the best technology can only serve as a tool to supplement the primary job of building character and virtue in their children. Our greater goal as parents is to help our children develop an "internal filter" to guide them when they leave the home.

Cultivating Character

Protecting children online takes a three-pronged effort. The first, and most significant prong, is your efforts to cultivate virtue in your children. Training your children to avoid the bad and seek the good is challenging but rewarding. The benefits will last throughout your child's entire life. This involves a total life commitment to not only teaching but *modeling* the behavior you expect them to learn.

- Research indicates that many of the destructive behaviors that children engage in stem from unstable home life. Inappropriate Internet use may be an outlet for dealing with the devastation caused by a violent or unstable home. Is your home safe and open or prone to verbal or violent outbursts? Have you created a home that emphasizes seeking out the good, the true and the beautiful, or are these lessons neglected due to busyness or inconvenience?

- Much of the harmful material online is pornographic in nature. Children are naturally curious about sexuality, especially once they hit puberty, and many will seek out such information. Parents have a tremendous opportunity to preempt the many lies found on the Internet by intentionally teaching God's design for sexuality and marriage long before puberty. When children understand and embrace their beautiful and true purpose for sexuality, they are less likely to be tempted by online counterfeits. An ounce of prevention concerning the meaning of sexuality is worth far more than a pound of cure after harmful exposure occurs.
- Modeling respect for both genders is a crucial aspect of cultivating virtue in children. How are women or men talked about in your home? Is there disrespect between the parents? Are little girls and boys equally loved and encouraged in the home? The deviant lessons inherent in pornography—that men and women are to be treated disrespectfully—are often first learned by what is modeled in the home.
- Children are often exposed to and encouraged to seek out pornography by others. Take a hard look at the kind of life they are exposed to at home, in school, and with their friends. The success of training children in virtue and building strong character depends on understanding all of the influences in their lives. Involved, intentional, and loving parenting is the best gift we can offer our children.

Building Walls and Setting Boundaries

The second prong in your effort to protect children is establishing boundaries and rules to govern behavior inside and outside the home. These protections include wise guidelines concerning how the computer is used and where it is located and establishing rules for what children are to do if they encounter offensive material.

- Keep the computer in a public area, like the family room or kitchen.
- Show your children what to do if they accidentally stumble onto a bad site.
- If you don't already do so, regularly check the Internet history files (although these can be deleted by knowledgeable computer users).
- Don't use the computer as a babysitter. Set time limits for computer use and discourage late night use.
- Warn your children about "talking" to strangers online; it's a rule that's as true on the Internet as it is on the streets. The Internet hides the true identity of users, so it's easy for people to misrepresent who they are.
- Guard your family's privacy by never giving out your name, address or phone number.
- Don't allow children to post photos or reveal personal information in the "Personal Profile" sections that some Internet companies provide. Pedophiles prey on this information.
- Spend time with your children on the Internet and teach them to be discerning by talking to them about the good and bad information on the Internet.
- Discuss how the Internet should be used in your home and how its use will be balanced with other activities. Set up ground rules for computer use and stick to them. Explain the consequences of misuse and follow through when necessary.

- One way to bring home the importance of this is to write out a contract for computer use detailing all rules, prohibitions, and punishments for infractions. Have all members of your family sign the document and post it by the computer.
- Maintain an atmosphere of open communication that invites your children to tell you about unfavorable sites they've come across.
- Set a good example by steering clear of pornography, gambling, romance and other online vices yourself.

Schools and Libraries

By law, all schools and libraries receiving federal funding are required to provide filtering on all computers with Internet access. However, some cities have chosen to deny the funds in order to keep filters off public computers. The American Library Association has vigorously opposed Internet filtering and encourages its members to remove filters whenever possible. Be sure to find out if your child's school or the local library employs filtering technology.

Rules for Visiting a Friend's or Relative's Home

Just as important as establishing rules for computer use *inside* your home are those for computer use *outside* your home. Some of your child's friends and maybe even some of your close relatives will not share your concern about inappropriate material online. Some children think it's cool to show their friends all the forbidden material they found on the Internet. Some relatives may mistakenly minimize or dismiss the negative impact of graphic or pornographic images upon a child, or may even wrongly consider them to be a form of "sex ed."

Your role as a parent is to do as much as you can to establish your expectations with your family and with the family of your child's friend. It may be difficult at first, but you may need to create some boundaries about what activities your child is able to do at a friend's house or how much supervision you require when he or she is visiting.

It is also your responsibility to establish and get your child to agree with your rules for computer use outside the home. This requires a great deal of trust, openness, and honesty between all involved. However, you can also build up your child by placing confidence in his ability to make wise and correct decisions when facing temptations outside the home. Just as you might arrange to have your child call for a ride if her friends begin drinking, you might arrange for your teen to call you if his friend insists on exposing him to Internet porn. The best option is to discuss the possible temptations and work with your child to develop a plan of action that he or she will be inclined to follow.

Understanding the Technology

The final prong of protection involves the use of filtering technology to fill in the remaining gaps. However, technology should never serve as a stand-alone protection strategy. No filtering technology is foolproof; determined children or adults can often subvert these protections. Protecting the home computer with technology is usually accomplished through one or more of three basic approaches:

- **Filtering through an Internet Service Provider (ISP)**
The first level of blocking or filtering offensive content occurs at the service provider level. Parents can subscribe to a service that filters all online material before it ever reaches the home computer. This requires little or no ongoing maintenance, but also may be less flexible than other options.
- **Filtering on the Home Computer**
Software installed on the home computer requires more initial set-up and ongoing maintenance. It also provides greater flexibility and freedom for families with varying needs and circumstances.
- **Monitoring Software**
Monitoring software does not filter or block online activities. Instead, it captures and records every Web site visited and keeps an accurate listing of surfing activity. Sometimes this log can be sent to a third party. For this reason, this option is often used with accountability relationships.

Choosing for Your Family

To help you in your efforts to choose an appropriate filtering device for your household, Focus on the Family offers information about family protection solutions on our Family Protection Web site at www.family.org/protection.

Note: Any specific references to organizations or their services do not necessarily imply a full endorsement by Focus on the Family

Focus on the Family Resources

The following items are available through Focus on the Family for the suggested donation noted.

Audiocassettes

- **“Child Safety on the Internet I-III”** (CT312 A-C) \$9

CDs

- **“The Seductive Lure of Internet Porn I-II”** (B00056D) \$9
- **“Parenting an Online Generation I-II”** (B01410D) \$9

Books

- *Logged On and Tuned Out: A Non-Techie’s Guide to Parenting a Tech Savvy Generation* by Vicki Courtney (P00727B) \$13

Web-based Information

- **Family Protection** (www.family.org/protection)
In addition to information about online safety, this Focus on the Family Web site offers material concerning entertainment and cultural issues that are important to parents in their efforts to combat the media's negative influence in their homes.

- **Focus on Your Child** (www.focusonyourchild.com)
Provides practical advice and resources for raising children from birth through the teen years. Includes helpful articles on computer use and wise media decisions for the family. Also includes a large section on Internet Safety at:
<http://www.focusonyourchild.com/hottopics/A0001282.cfm>

- **Pure Intimacy** (www.pureintimacy.org)
Focus on the Family's in-depth resource for sexual brokenness and wholeness. Addresses addiction issues and presents a compelling Christian vision of sexuality with resources for spouses, clergy, and parents among others

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