Internet safety for children

Summary

- Keep an active eye on what your child does when connected to the Internet.
- Teach your child strategies to protect themselves online.
- Your child should only make online contact with people they already know – strangers who want to be your child’s online ‘friend’ may in fact be mature-age sex offenders.
- Report unwelcome contact to the relevant authorities.

The Internet can be a dangerous place for the unwary, particularly children. A person’s ‘digital footprint’ can be as easy to follow as their real footprints.

Many parents worry about how to protect their children from Internet harm or unwelcome contact.

This may include harassment, bullying (known as ‘cyberbullying’), stalking or grooming (making friends with the purpose of having sexual contact at a later stage). It is important to explain the dangers of careless Internet use to your child and keep an active eye on their Internet use.

Teach your child to protect themselves online. A good starting point is to read through this fact sheet together. You can browse the online references for further information.

General safety suggestions for parents

Suggestions include:

- There is no substitute for parental supervision. Keep an active eye on what your child does online.
- Many people, including children, believe that Internet browsing is anonymous. Educate your child on the permanence of their ‘digital reputation’. Whenever they visit a website, share content, post something on a blog or upload information, they are adding to their ‘digital footprint’. This can be gathered under their real name and accessed by interested parties such as future employers or marketing departments. This may occur without you or your child’s consent or knowledge.
- Your child should only make online contact with people they already know. Strangers who want to be your child’s online ‘friend’ may in fact be mature-age sex offenders. Monitor your child’s online relationships.
- Ask that your child check with you first before filling in online forms. Emphasise the importance of never sharing personal information online.
- Install safety software on your computer so that you can restrict your child’s online activities to approved websites.

Social networking

A social networking site allows the user to interact online with friends, family members and strangers who have similar interests. Popular social networking sites include Facebook and MySpace. Users can communicate with others in many ways – exchange personal news, upload photographs and digital footage, and share links to interesting web pages.

Some of the potential risks of joining a social networking site include:

- The bits and pieces of information your child puts on their profile may give away their physical address. For example, if your child gives their full name, nominates their suburb and uploads school photographs, anyone...
who wishes to could pinpoint their location.

- Information about hobbies and interests provide an easy way for sex offenders to make friendly contact with your child.
- Anything published online must be considered a permanent record. The type of material posted by your child may harm their future job prospects. These days, employers routinely screen potential candidates by checking their ‘digital reputation’.

Social networking sites – safety suggestions for parents

Suggestions include:

- Limit personal information listed online. Your child shouldn’t post their full name, age, birth date, address, email, telephone numbers or school information. Encourage them to use a made-up screen name instead.
- Set your child’s profile to ‘private’ so that only confirmed friends can have access to their information. Go to the privacy section of the social networking site for more information on how to protect your child’s profile.
- Withdraw any address details. Do not post photographs that could give away the suburb – for example, pictures of your child and their friends in school uniform.
- Use the ‘no picture forwarding’ function so that your child’s photographs cannot be passed around to friends-of-friends and beyond.
- Stress the importance of never sharing passwords.

Unwelcome contact

Unwelcome contact includes harassment, bullying (known as ‘cyberbullying’ when it occurs online or using a mobile phone), stalking or grooming (making friends with the purpose of having sexual contact at a later stage). Like any unwanted contact, the source may be a stranger or it could someone known to you or your child. It may be an adult or another child.

Without your consent or knowledge, the person may:

- Piece together all of the publicly available information on your child to discover contact details such as the child’s physical address or school.
- Pose as a peer on social networking sites or chat rooms.
- Upload hostile, mean or embarrassing posts about your child onto chat rooms or social networking sites.
- Create a fake profile for your child on a social networking site to cause embarrassment or pain.
- Use your child’s posted email address to send hostile or inappropriate emails.

Unwelcome contact – suggestions for parents

Suggestions include:

- Report any unwelcome contact to the relevant authorities. Your Internet service provider (ISP), your child’s school or police will need proof. Make sure that you save copies of the unwelcome contact for evidence.
- Do not personally respond to the unwelcome person. Encourage your child to ignore all contact.
- Use privacy settings to block the unwelcome person from making further contact.
- Remove your child’s contact information from websites.

Harmful or inappropriate content

You need to protect your child from Internet material that is inappropriate, frightening or illegal. Your child may inadvertently stumble across such material if they:

- Use a search engine for a legitimate topic and get a link to an inappropriate site
- Click on hyperlinks or pop-ups
- Open junk mail or spam
Play an online game
Open an email attachment.

In other cases, children (particularly older children and teenagers) may purposefully seek out inappropriate content.

Harmful or inappropriate content – suggestions for parents

Suggestions include:

- Monitor your child’s Internet use. Put the computer in a common area within the household such as the kitchen.
- Teach your child strategies to protect themselves online.
- Help your child when they need to perform an online search.
- Install filters on your computer and on your server. Talk with your ISP for more information.
- Bookmark approved websites. Tell your child to stick to these websites whenever they browse online.
- Advise your child to avoid risky activities like clicking on pop-ups.
- Report content you consider harmful or inappropriate by lodging a complaint with the content supplier or the Australian Broadcasting Authority.

Where to get help

- Your Internet service provider (ISP)
- NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) Tel. (02) 9269 9200
- Smart Online Safe Offline website.
- Content Assessment Hotline Manager, Australian Communications and Media Authority or Email online@acma.gov.au or fax (02) 9334 7799
- Crime Stoppers Tel. 1800 333 000
- Child Wise (ECPAT in Australia) Tel. 9645 8911 or 1800 99 10 99
- Your state police service
- Australian Federal Police (AFP) – with this online form, you can report inappropriate online behaviour or child exploitation to the AFP

Things to remember

- Keep an active eye on what your child does when connected to the Internet.
- Teach your child strategies to protect themselves online.
- Your child should only make online contact with people they already know – strangers who want to be your child’s online ‘friend’ may in fact be mature-age sex offenders.
- Report unwelcome contact to the relevant authorities.