Tips for Monitoring Kids Online

If your children are always on their phones or on the Internet, what can you do to keep them safe?

- GET INTERNET SAFETY TIPS FROM PROFESSIONALS SUCH AS BARK.³ Start early, when they first begin using devices, and be sure they understand you are only protecting them, not robbing them of their fun.

- IF THEY’RE ONLINE make sure the computer they are using is in a shared space in your home where you can see what they’re viewing/doing. Stay involved. Check their browsing history regularly.

- TALK WITH YOUR KIDS! Discuss with them safe social media practices, the dangers of starting a conversation with someone they don’t know (or only think they know), and why sharing too much personal information can be dangerous. (They should be warned about sharing locations, daily schedules and routines, addresses, names of school/church/clubs, bus routes.)

- CHECK THEIR MOBILE DEVICES AND LAPTOPS REGULARLY. Establish guidelines about checking with you before loading new apps. Interact with them to get an explanation of any new apps they want to load and discuss how to use them safely.

- BE AWARE OF PRIVACY SETTINGS AND CHECK THE SETTINGS ON THEIR DEVICES REGULARLY. New apps are prolific so set regular calendar reminders for yourself to look at any electronic device your child uses that connects to the Internet. (Pay special attention to online or video games, social media, and apps for music, pictures, connecting, or sharing.)

- DISCUSS BEDROOM ETIQUETTE IN YOUR HOME. If visitors of the opposite sex aren’t allowed into their room, then live chat with an online visitor should be treated in the same manner. Remind them that showing something to someone online is the same as inviting that stranger into their bedroom. Would you go to the door and greet a guest in your underwear? No, of course not. So don’t FaceTime or send photos while wearing only underwear, or even pajamas.

- DO NOT ALLOW YOUR CHILDREN TO HAVE DEVICES AT NIGHT, which is essentially “leaving a front door open” while you’re sleeping.

- DISCUSS WITH YOUR CHILD THE TACTICS USED BY PREDATORS and explain to them why it’s safer if you collect electronic devices at bedtime and put them all on chargers in another room.

If you hear about kids sending inappropriate pictures to one another, recognize that this is not just a normal part of growing up. Teach your children that:

- Sexting is very dangerous, because on the Internet those photos never go away.

- You can never know who will see that photo so don’t send something you don’t want everyone to see.

- You may like the boy/girlfriend today but not like them next week. You don’t want someone to have a photo of you that’s very private.

- Underage sexting is illegal and if you are caught, even though you are underage yourself, you could be charged with possession and distribution of child pornography.

- It’s never appropriate to send a photo of yourself unclothed, to anyone. Ever.
TALK OPENLY WITH YOUR KIDS, in a non-judgmental way, especially about relationships and healthy boundaries.

TEACH THEM HOW TO RESPOND to various threatening situations, including online threats.

TEACH THEM THAT YOU WILL ALWAYS LISTEN. Put away your phone or set aside other distractions, make eye contact, and be present no matter what they want to talk about.

TEACH THEM NOT TO KEEP SECRETS and to tell you immediately if someone tells them not to tell.

SHOW them Shared Hope’s Chosen documentary. Sometimes they will listen to someone else.

As your children get older, they may resent your interference in their lives. How can you make them feel good about talking to you?

If anything makes you uncomfortable online:
- immediately stop the conversation
- exit the app but don’t delete anything
- tell your safe adult about the incident
- the adult will investigate and alert the proper authorities if someone appears to be an online predator. (Clues that the person you’re interacting with could be an online predator include asking for nude/compromising photos, requesting personal information, asking to meet with you, wanting to share a secret with you, asking you to keep a secret). Approaching a minor sexually is illegal, so the police will investigate.

CREATE A “SAFE WORD” that they can use on the phone with you if they’re ever feeling unsafe (for instance: “I’m hungry for pepperoni pizza”). Let them know you’ll immediately come pick them up without repercussions if they aren’t where they were supposed to be. Always give them an out, and the confidence that you will be their ally.

When you pick them up, don’t be angry, but instead ask:
- How can we make sure you’re safe next time?
- Tell me why you think this could have been dangerous (drugs or alcohol offered, no adults present, no one knew where I was).
If anyone ever tells them they’re supposed to come with them (“Your mom has been hit by a car and she sent me to bring you to the hospital”), your child is to ask, “What is the password?” If that person doesn’t provide it correctly, the child knows to run and yell for help and not to go with them, no matter who it is.

Monitoring your kids’ online devices is a challenge. We understand how difficult it can be to keep up with today’s ever-changing technology, along with doing just the requirements of everyday parenting and managing all of life’s other responsibilities. But we know your child’s safety is your first concern, so this resource is intended to give you easily understood tools and information to support your efforts.

You may make sure your kid’s phone has privacy settings on. Is that enough?

- There are ways to hack into information that can easily bypass standard privacy settings.
- Research online sources like netsmartz.org for easy access to parental controls.
- Listen to the Shared Hope Internet Safety Video Series (sharedhope.org/internetsafety).
- Establish as a general rule for your child/teen that they never post anything they don’t want everyone to see/know. Encourage them to think about who will know private information about you, like where you go and what you do, if you post this information.

To help you get started, here are some tips:

- Guard your kids at the location level. Keep internet devices out of the bedroom as much as possible. Have a bedtime “turn in” time when you have the devices lined up on a power strip charging in a different room.
- Talk to parents of friends where your kids spend time (it’s worth the awkward conversation). Ask at school and church about wireless access points, and be sure you’re satisfied with their answers about monitoring web activity, etc.
- Guard your router/network signal. Is it filtered? Do you worry about kids or babysitters surfing your WiFi for inappropriate content? Check out these easy instructions how to filter your signal.
- Guard the device. Predators can communicate with your children through iPhones, Chromebooks, MacBooks, iPads, and laptops. Here is a simple go-to guide to monitor and filter all of these devices. Although many parents don’t realize it, predators can also communicate with children via Xbox/Playstation consoles. Here is a simple guide to filter Xbox/Playstation consoles.
We recommend internetmatters.org as a resource to accesses step-by-step instructions on how to set-up parental controls.

In short, devices need parental controls — period. Compare it to driving a car. You would prepare a child to get their driver’s license before you handed over the keys to the car. You control access to the vehicle, practice with them, quiz them, and remain in control until you’re ready to let them drive independently. But even then, you want to know where they are going, with whom, and when they will be back. Internet access is no different and can be just as dangerous as an unmonitored teen behind the wheel.