

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 59

December 2011

Children Online

Computers have traditionally been trusted by both children and adults as reliable and accurate sources of information. The rapid growth of online services and internet access has added a new dimension to modern computing. Through the internet children now have access to an almost endless supply of information and opportunity for interaction. However, there can be real risks and dangers for an unsupervised child.

Most online services give children resources such as encyclopedias, current events coverage, and access to libraries and other valuable material. They can also play games and communicate with friends on social media platforms like Facebook. The ability to "click" from one area to another appeals to a child's natural impulsivity and curiosity and needs for immediate gratification or feedback.

Most parents teach their children not to talk with strangers, not to open the door if they are home alone, and not to give out information on the telephone to unknown callers. Most parents also monitor where their children go, who they play with, and what TV shows, books, or magazines they are exposed to. However, many parents don't realize that **the same level of guidance and supervision must be provided for a child's online experience.**

Parents cannot assume that their child will be protected by the supervision or regulation provided by the online services. Most "chat rooms" and social media sites are completely unsupervised. Because of the anonymous nature of the "screen name," children who communicate with others in these areas will not know if they are "talking" with another child or a child predator pretending to be a child or teen. Unlike the mail and visitors that a parent sees a child receive at home, e-mail or "chat room" activity is not seen by parents. Unfortunately, there can be serious consequences to children who have been persuaded to give personal information, (e.g. name, passwords, phone number, email or home address) or have agreed to meet someone in person.

Some of the other risks or problems include:

- accessing areas that are inappropriate or overwhelming
- being exposed to online information that promotes hate, violence, and pornography
- being misled and bombarded with intense advertising
- being invited to register for prizes or to join a club when they are providing personal or household information to an unknown source
- losing time from developing real social skills and from physical activity and exercise

Children Online, "Facts for Families," No. 59 (12/11)

- revealing too much personal information on social media sites
- being bullied on social media sites

In order to make a child's online experience more safe and educational, parents should:

- limit the amount of time a child spends online and "surfing the web"
- teach a child that talking to "screen names" in a "chat room" is the same as talking with strangers
- teach a child never to give out any personal identifying information to another individual or website online
- teach a child to never agree to actually meet someone they have met online
- never give a child credit card numbers or passwords that will enable online purchases or access to inappropriate services or sites
- remind a child that not everything they see or read online is true
- make use of the parental control features offered with your online service, or obtaining commercially available software programs, to restrict access to "chat lines," news groups, and inappropriate websites
- provide for an individual e-mail address only if a child is mature enough to manage it, and plan to periodically monitor the child's e-mail and online activity
- monitor the content of a child's personal webpage and screen name profile information
- teach a child to use the same courtesy in communicating with others online as they would if speaking in person -- i.e. no vulgar or profane language, no name calling, etc.
- insist that a child follow the same guidelines at other computers that they might have access to, such as those at school, libraries, or friends' homes

Parents should remember that communicating online does not prepare children for real interpersonal relationships. Spending time with a child initially exploring an online service and periodically participating with a child in the online experience gives parents an opportunity to monitor and supervise the activity. It is also an opportunity to learn together.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

[#24 Know When to Seek Help For Your Child](#)

[#40 Influence of Music and Music Videos](#)

[#46 Home Alone Children](#)

If you find *Facts for Families*® helpful and would like to make good mental health a reality, consider donating to the [Campaign for America's Kids](#). Your support will help us continue to produce and distribute Facts for Families, as well as other vital mental health information, free of charge.

You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to *Campaign for America's Kids*, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

Children Online, “Facts for Families,” No. 59 (12/11)

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 8,500 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

Facts for Families© information sheets are developed, owned and distributed by AACAP. Hard copies of **Facts** sheets may be reproduced for personal or educational use without written permission, but cannot be included in material presented for sale or profit. All **Facts** can be viewed and printed from the AACAP website (www.aacap.org). **Facts** sheets may not be reproduced, duplicated or posted on any other website without written consent from AACAP. Organizations are permitted to create links to AACAP’s website and specific **Facts** sheets. For all questions please contact the AACAP Communications & Marketing Coordinator, ext. 154.

If you need immediate assistance, please dial 911.

Copyright © 2012 by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.