

**THE INTERNET AND YOUR CHILD:
AVOIDING TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS ON THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY
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“Sara (13 years) was excelling in academics and such a whiz on the computer. When she was selected to the National Junior Honors Society we were so proud and bought a computer all to herself for Christmas. We joked that she was married to the computer because that seemed her favorite thing to do. Imagine our shock when we found she was surfing and downloading adult pornographic websites from the Internet.”

“We always worried that Sean (15 years) was shy and lonely. The computer was his best friend and he used it all the time for homework and listening to music. Recently though he seemed to be more animated and we were happily surprised when he wanted to spend a weekend at a friend’s home. To our incredulous dismay the police brought Sean to our home on Sunday evening. Sean had been caught with an adult sex offender crossing state lines that morning.”

“Mary Jean (16 years) is such a beautiful teenager and began modeling when she was barely 7 years old. When she was younger I always made sure I was present for the photo shoots but she can handle them on her own now that she is older. She is so computer savvy that she is always sending her grandparents pictures of herself. Nothing prepared me for the disaster of being called by an FBI agent at work one day and being informed that my daughter was identified on child pornography websites. They had found these pictures on the seized computer of a convicted sex offender.”

“We don’t have a computer at home so Eduardo (10 years) used to go to my neighbor’s house and use it frequently. We began getting concerned when Eduardo started using grown up language about body parts and sex, and wanted to make phone calls to people we had never heard of before.”

Horried parents ask “How could this be happening in OUR family? I thought we raised our kids with better values and judgment.”

These are selected instances of computer and Internet related crimes against children which I have encountered as a Forensic Pediatrician, working with abused children. **The children’s names are fictional but their stories are not.** Practically every family now has a computer, so every child is potentially at risk. Allowing a child to access a computer is akin to a teenager driving without adult supervision. In a sense, it is fraught with many of the same risks and dangers. Here’s a look at how one can avoid traffic accidents on the **“information superhighway”** in this generation of techno-savvy kids.

The information superhighway is also called cyberspace, the web, the net etc. It enables kids to eagerly communicate with one another, do research for homework projects, keep up on hobbies and the latest news, and explore ways to have fun. The possibilities are endless. But there are some very real **risks to children in cyberspace:**

- ⊗ More than 4 million *pornographic sites* exist online, allowing children unrestricted access to sexually explicit or age inappropriate content.
- ⊗ Children can be exposed to material that is *violent, harassing, demeaning or illegal.*
- ⊗ Children may unwittingly *provide personal information* to sexual predators (called **pedophiles**) in “chat rooms” and bulletin boards, thereby endangering their safety.
- ⊗ Pedophiles can use email addresses, information from bulletin boards and chat rooms to *gain a child’s confidence and arrange a face to face meeting*, after which they can sexually molest and/or abduct the child.
- ⊗ Children may *endanger their family’s safety*, for example by giving out credit card information, photographs, etc on the web.

The **statistics** in the US are staggeringly worrisome.

- * 90% of children aged 8-16 years have been exposed to internet pornography.
- * Children 12-17 years are the largest users of internet pornography.
- * The average age of first exposure to internet pornography is 11 years.
- * 1 in 5 kids has been sexually solicited online.
- * 1 in 4 kids has received a sexually explicit picture online.
- * The 1st child death directly related to internet pornography occurred in 2002.

Some warning signs that your child may be at risk online are:

- ⊗! Your child spends long hours online, especially at night.
- ⊗! You find pornographic websites on your child’s computer.
- ⊗! Your child quickly changes the monitor screen or turns off the computer when a parent comes into the room.
- ⊗! Your child becomes withdrawn from the family.
- ⊗! Your child uses an online account that does not belong to him or uses accounts that you do not know about.
- ⊗! Your child receives phone calls or mail packages from strangers.

While a pornographic website is graphically explicit, the larger danger lies in the vast **anonymity** of the web. **Pedophiles thrive in cyberspace**, where strangers talk to children freely in chat rooms. At first engaging in **friendly conversations**, the pedophile slowly gains the confidence of the child and becomes increasingly **sexually directed** towards the child in the privacy of the internet. This usually happens so smoothly that both the child and parent(s) are **caught unawares** by the true intentions of the molester.

Parents and children can establish “**netiquette**” by establishing a **safe computing**” contract which respects the child’s need for privacy but sets the ground rules for usage. Obviously such covenants are meaningless unless enforced.

A sample computing contract is shown in the box below:

SAFE COMPUTING CONTRACT

- ☺ I will never share my name, address, phone number, digital picture or other personal information online. I understand that this information, once given, cannot be taken back.
- ☺ I will never share information about my parents and family online.
- ☺ I will tell an adult I trust if I see something confusing, mean or scary.
- ☺ I will not change my screen name and password without talking to an adult about it.
- ☺ I will never install or download software from sites that I visit if I am unsure about it and don't talk to a grown up about it.
- ☺ I will never change computer settings and software that are designed for my protection (for example, Firewalls, Internet Filters, Popup Blockers etc).
- ☺ I will not allow a friend to use my computer unless my parents allow it.
- ☺ I will not agree to meet anyone in person whom I have first "met" online.

Parents need to be proactive in the following ways:

- ☺ Computers belong in a visible area of the home, rather than a private bedroom.
- ☺ Avoid screen names for children that are gender and age specific (for example "sexyteen15")
- ☺ Talk to your child frequently about their web surfing activities.
- ☺ Review the history of websites visited by the computer (available on Internet Explorer, Netscape and AOL) by using the HELP or HISTORY feature on the browser.
- ☺ Use monitoring software (for example, NetNanny, Integrity Online etc) to keep tabs on your child's internet usage and filter out inappropriate websites.
- ☺ Equip your computer with adequate security precautions such as Firewalls, Antivirus, and Anti Spyware, password protection etc.
- ⊗ **REMEMBER!** Pedophiles are constantly looking for ways to outsmart you and entice your unsuspecting child.

I found these websites useful in providing educational links:

- * www.netsmartz.org (true stories of teens' online experiences)
- * www.NetNanny.com, www.integrityonline.com, www.safesurfing.com (information on filtering software)
- * www.safeteens.com, www.safekids.com (excellent detailed teenage and child internet safety tips)
- * www.getnetwise.com (safety tips specifically by age category, plus a list of approved websites that are child/family friendly)
- * www.ncmec.org (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children addresses how to report when your child receives unsolicited obscene material (1-800-843-5678).

* www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm: The FBI's parental guide to internet safety, including warning signs to help detect that your child may be at risk online

* www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/edcams/kidzprivacy/index.html (Information on COPPA: Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998)

Children can be potentially victimized under any circumstances. Parents, educators, caregivers, and children themselves can and should be counseled about the risks of the information super highway before they are given a license to drive on it. This will make their navigation more informed and hopefully, less dangerous.

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