Technology Safety: Rules for Kids On-Line

The following guidelines were downloaded from ISED-L, the independent school listserv on the Internet:

After the hysteria of the TIME article about the Marty Rimm study, the following may be of interest and of use. It is my understanding that it can be distributed freely (with attribution) and that the html version may be linked to or posted on ISP general information pages.

It is the text of a brochure that was written by Larry Magid and jointly produced by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Interactive Services Association (8403 Colesville Road, Suite 865, Silver Spring, MD 20910). It was sponsored by America Online, CompuServe, Delphi Internet, e-World, GEnie, Interchange Online Network, and Prodigy Service.

An html version is available on the World Wide Web at URL:
http://www.compuserve.com/new/news_rel/chldsfty.html

CHILD SAFETY ON THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY

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Whatever it's called, millions of people are now connecting their personal computers to telephone lines so that they can "go online." Traditionally, online services have been oriented towards adults, but that's changing. An increasing number of schools are going online and, in many homes, children are logging on to commercial services, private bulletin boards, and the Internet. As a parent you need to understand the nature of these systems.

Online services are maintained by commercial, self-regulated businesses that may screen or provide editorial/user controls, when possible, of the material contained on their systems.

Computer Bulletin Boards, called BBS systems, can be operated by individuals, businesses, or organizations. The material presented is usually theme oriented offering information on hobbies and interests. While there are BBS systems that feature "adult" oriented material, most attempt to limit minors from accessing the information contained in those systems.

The Internet, a global "network of networks," is not governed by any entity. This leaves no limits or checks on the kind of information that is maintained by and accessible to Internet users.

The Benefits of the Information Highway

The vast array of services that you currently find online is constantly growing. Reference information such as news, weather, sports, stock quotes, movie reviews, encyclopedias, and airline fares are readily available online. Users can conduct transactions such as trading stocks, making travel reservations, banking, and shopping online. Millions of people communicate through electronic mail (E-mail) with family and friends around the world and others use the public message boards to make new friends who share common interests. As an educational and entertainment tool users can learn about virtually any topic, take a college course, or play an endless number of computer games with other users or against the computer itself. User "computing" is enhanced by accessing online thousands of shareware and free public domain software titles.

Most people who use online services have mainly positive experiences. But, like any endeavor - traveling, cooking, or attending school - there are some risks. The online world, like the rest of society, is made up of a wide array of people. Most are decent and respectful, but some may be rude, obnoxious, insulting or even mean and exploitative.

Children and teenagers get a lot of benefit from being online, but they can also be targets of crime and exploitation in this as in any other environment. Trusting, curious, and anxious to explore this

new world and the relationships it brings, children and teenagers need parental supervision and common sense advice on how to be sure that their experiences in "cyberspace" are happy, healthy, and productive.

Putting the Issue in Perspective

Although there have been some highly publicized cases of abuse involving computers, reported cases are relatively infrequent. Of course, like most crimes against children, many cases go unreported, especially if the child is engaged in an activity that he or she does not want to discuss with a parent. The fact that crimes are being committed online, however, is not a reason to avoid using these services. To tell children to stop using these services would be like telling them to forgo attending college because students are sometimes victimized on campus. A better strategy would be for children to learn how to be "street smart" in order to better safeguard themselves in any potentially dangerous situation.

What Are the Risks?

There are a few risks for children who use online services. Teenagers are particularly at risk because they often use the computer unsupervised and because they are more likely than younger children to participate in online discussions regarding companionship, relationships, or sexual activity. Some risks are:

Exposure to Inappropriate Material: One risk is that a child may be exposed to inappropriate material of a sexual or violent nature.

Physical Molestation: Another risk is that, while online, a child might provide information or arrange an encounter that could risk his or her safety or the safety of other family members. In a few cases, pedophiles have used online services and bulletin boards to gain a child's confidence and then arrange a face-to-face meeting.

Harassment: A third risk is that a child might encounter E-mail or bulletin board messages that are harassing, demeaning, or belligerent.

How Parents Can Reduce the Risks

To help restrict your child's access to discussions, forums, or bulletin boards that contain inappropriate material, whether textual or graphic, many of the commercial online services and some private bulletin boards have systems in place for parents to block out parts of the service they feel are inappropriate for their children. If you are concerned, you should contact the service via telephone or E- mail to find out how you can add these restrictions to any accounts that your children can access.

The Internet and some private bulletin boards contain areas designed specifically for adults who wish to post, view, or read sexually explicit material. Most private bulletin board operators who post such material limit access to people who attest that they are adults but, like any other safeguards, be aware that there are always going to be cases where adults fail to enforce them or children find ways around them.

The best way to assure that your children are having positive online experiences is to stay in touch with what they are doing. One way to do this is to spend time with your children while they're online. Have them show you what they do and ask them to teach you how to access the services.

While children and teenagers need a certain amount of privacy, they also need parental involvement and supervision in their daily lives. The same general parenting skills that apply to the "real world" also apply while online.

If you have cause for concern about your children's online activities, talk to them. Also seek out the advice and counsel of other computer users in your area and become familiar with literature on

these systems. Open communication with your children, utilization of such computer resources, and getting online yourself will help you obtain the full benefits of these systems and alert you to any potential problem that may occur with their use.

Guidelines for Parents

By taking responsibility for your children's online computer use, parents can greatly minimize any potential risks of being online. Make it a family rule to:

Never give out identifying information (home address, school name, or telephone number) in a public message such as chat or bulletin boards, and be sure you're dealing with someone that both you and your child know and trust before giving it out via E-mail. Think carefully before revealing any personal information such as age, marital status, or financial information. Consider using a pseudonym or unlisting your child's name if your service allows it.

Get to know the services your child uses. If you don't know how to log on, get your child to show you. Find out what types of information it offers and whether there are ways for parents to block out objectionable material.

Never allow a child to arrange a face-to-face meeting with another computer user without parental permission. If a meeting is arranged, make the first one in a public spot, and be sure to accompany your child.

Never respond to messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, threatening, or make you feel uncomfortable. Encourage your children to tell you if they encounter such messages. If you or your child receives a message that is harassing, of a sexual nature, or threatening, forward a copy of the message to your service provider and ask for their assistance.

Should you become aware of the transmission, use, or viewing of child pornography while online, immediately report this to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children by calling 1-800-843-5678. You should also notify your online service.

Remember that people online may not be who they seem. Because you can't see or even hear the person it would be easy for someone to misrepresent him- or herself. Thus, someone indicating that "she" is a "12-year-old girl" could in reality be a 40-year-old man.

Remember that everything you read online may not be true. Any offer that's "too good to be true" probably is. Be very careful about any offers that involve your coming to a meeting or having someone visit your house.

Set reasonable rules and guidelines for computer use by your children (see "My Rules for Online Safety" on last page as sample). Discuss these rules and post them near the computer as a reminder. Remember to monitor their compliance with these rules, especially when it comes to the amount of time your children spend on the computer. A child or teenager's excessive use of online services or bulletin boards, especially late at night, may be a clue that there is a potential problem. Remember that personal computers and online services should not be used as electronic baby-sitters.

Be sure to make this a family activity. Consider keeping the computer in a family room rather than the child's bedroom. Get to know their "online friends" just as you get to know all of their other friends.

This brochure was written by Lawrence J. Magid, a syndicated columnist for the Los Angeles Times, who is author of Cruising Online: Larry Magid's Guide to the New Digital Highway (Random House, 1994) and The Little PC Book (Peachpit Press, 1993).

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This brochure was made possible by the generous sponsorship of: America Online, CompuServe, Delphi Internet, e-World, GEnie, Interchange Online Network, and Prodigy Service.

My Rules for Online Safety

I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parents' work address/telephone number, or the name and location of my school without my parents' permission.

I will tell my parents right away if I come across any information that makes me feel uncomfortable.

I will never agree to get together with someone I "meet" online without first checking with my parents. If my parents agree to the meeting, I will be sure that it is in a public place and bring my mother or father along.

I will never send a person my picture or anything else without first checking with my parents.

I will not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel uncomfortable. It is not my fault if I get a message like that. If I do I will tell my parents right away so that they can contact the online service.

I will talk with my parents so that we can set up rules for going online. We will decide upon the time of day that I can be online, the length of time I can be online, and appropriate areas for me to visit. I will not access other areas or break these rules without their permission.

For further information on child safety, please call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).

Author: Larry Magid, and ISED-L Contributors, July, '95