Being Smart and Kind Online: A Family’s Guide to Internet Safety and Digital Citizenship

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Internet Safety Contract Included!
In today’s world, we are surrounded by technology; it’s in our cars, our kitchens, our bedrooms, and our hand-held smartphones. However, with all this tech comes mixed messages, hurt feelings, misunderstandings, and dangerous situations. Parents may find themselves wondering how they can protect their children and provide a healthy environment for them to grow up in.

The answer is simple. **Learn, do, and teach.** Parents should learn all they can about digital citizenship, internet usage, and safety. Then practice what they learn and teach their children to do the same.
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Don’t forget to sign the Internet Safety Contract!
As of 2015, 88% of American teenagers have access to cell phones with more than 70% owning smartphones (Lenhart, 2015). Seventy-six percent of these teens use at least one social media site, with 25% constantly connecting to the web (Media C. o., 2016). With all this technology at our fingertips, it is essential for parents to teach their kids how to be safe online.

Safety starts with understanding the risks and dangers around us. The internet offers a vast array of entertainment and information at the touch of a button. However, with this ease of access comes opportunities for misuse and abuse of personal information.

- In 2017, more than 1 million children were victims of identity theft (Al Pascual, 2018).
- Nearly 43% of kids have experienced cyberbullying, and 81% believe online bullying is easier to get away with than traditional bullying (Educate and Empower Kids, 2018).
- The average age of pornography exposure is between the ages of 8 and 11 years old (Fight the New Drug, 2018).
- Exposure to violent media can decrease children’s empathy and increase their fear and aggression (Yalda T. Uhls, 2017).
Many popular websites used by teens are also used by predators who target teenagers.

Studies have shown excessive screen use has increased the risk of health issues among children and teens such as depression, obesity, and sleep problems (Yalda T. Uhls, 2017).

Overuse of technology in children and teens can lead to an increased risk of suicide due to cyberbullying, predators, and social media challenges.

While these dangers are real and very threatening, the internet does offer an extensive amount of advantages such as:

- Access to a wealth of information, including research, data, lectures, news, weather, and online learning opportunities.
- Being a part of the global community by connecting with people and organizations from around the world.
- Online management of everyday tasks such as banking, bills, work, school, and shopping.
- Store and access important information through services such as OneDrive, Dropbox, and iCloud.
- Help others in need, through local and international relief efforts.
- Endless entertainment choices that families can enjoy together.
- Opportunities to spread kindness and good wherever you go.
Be Responsible

Being a responsible **digital citizen** (using technology in an appropriate and responsible way) is key to staying safe online. When you are mindful about what you read, post, view, or search, you are less likely to come across things that are harmful to yourself and others.

But what does it mean to be a responsible digital citizen? In our children’s book *Noah’s New Phone* we describe digital citizenship as “using technology to enhance your family, school, and community through tolerance, kindness, authenticity, and ingenuity” (Alexander, 2017, p. 56).
Here are some ways you can practice being a good digital citizen.

- Promote kindness, not hate on social media sites.
- Find time to get away from your screens. A good digital citizen needs to be mentally and physically healthy.
- Protect private information. Do not share anything that could put you or others at risk of danger.
- Be respectful of others and their property. Do not steal others’ work, words, or ideas.
- Stand up to cyberbullying. If you see something dangerous or hurtful, tell an adult.
- Avoid toxic and dangerous media. If someone challenges you to do a dangerous activity or to view an inappropriate picture or video, say NO and tell an adult.
- Help to protect others. If someone you know is thinking of harming themselves or others tell an adult.
- Don’t use digital media as a time filler, babysitter, or a mood regulator. Use it to be creative, helpful, educated, and kind.
While everyone loves spending time on their devices, too much time can be harmful. It is important to make sure every member of the family has time away from screens and media every day. The American Academy of Pediatrics has found that while there are benefits to using digital media such as exposure to new ideas, more social contact, and access to information, there are also great risks (Yalda T. Uhls, 2017, Yolanda [Linda] Reid Chassiakos, 2016).

These risks include:

- Sleep and attention issues
- A higher occurrence of obesity
- Depression
- Self-esteem issues
- Exposure to inappropriate content
- Social Anxiety
- Cyberbullying
Because of these risks, it is important to unplug and find time away from screens. Here are some ideas you can try with your family.

- Family dinner with no electronic devices
- Family game night
- Outdoor sports (competitive or casual)
- Baking or cooking as a family
- Reading a book together as a family
- Keeping digital devices out of bedrooms and homework areas

Another important thing to consider is how much screen time is too much. According to recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, children ages 2 and under should avoid any screen exposure, while children ages 3 to 6 should only have about an hour a day. From ages 0 to 6, adult interaction while using media is critical for healthy development. Once a child is over the age of 6, the AAP simply recommends moderate, productive screen time usage (Media C. o., 2016).
Safety while doing anything is important. We would never ride a roller coaster without the harness in place or skydive without a parachute. So why would we allow our children to go online without having set safety measures in place to protect them?

Some things to consider when deciding how to protect your children are: what type of devices you wish to allow in your home, where you will be keeping internet-enabled devices, what filters you should use, what rules will be in place, and how often you want to discuss internet safety with your family.

When deciding what type of devices you will allow in your house, here are a few things to consider.

- Does the device have built-in protection to help filter unwanted media?
- Does the device have software available to help protect family members from harmful media?
- Does the device take meaningful time away from family members?
- Does the device allow family bonding as well as contribute to personal well-being?
Internet filters can help protect family members from unwanted exposure to violent, mature, and/or unhealthy media. When considering how to monitor and filter the content that is being viewed, one must consider three main areas of content access.

1) Router. The first line of defense is the router. There are multiple ways to filter at the router level including software, hardware, and DNS. Router Limits, Circle with Disney, Clean Router, and Koalasafe are hardware devices that you can plug into your router and use to set limits that will affect your entire wifi network. OpenDNS.com is a DNS option that will also filter at a router level. Some routers also come with built-in parental controls that can assist in controlling what content is viewed from any device connected to that specific router.

2) Devices. The second line of defense is at a device level. Many devices come with their own parental controls that offer parents a basic level of protection for their children. However, there are many other ways to provide protection at a device level. Several companies offer internet filtering software that you can download to your device. Some examples are NetNanny, Norton Family, K9 Web Protection, Witigo, Covenant Eyes, Circle, and Puresight.

3) Programs. The third line of defense involves programs. Some servers offer built-in protections that you can apply to your account. YouTube, Google, Amazon Prime, and Netflix are a few examples of website that offer parental controls that can help block inappropriate content.
Be United

Being united as a family on internet safety and usage provides each member with an extra safeguard against harmful media. The first step to becoming united is to have a family meeting to discuss internet safety. This meeting should cover the following points.

- What filtering and monitoring devices will the family use?

- Time limits. As referenced earlier, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children under 2 should have little to no screen time, ages 2 to 6 should have around 1 hour of screen time, and children older than 6 should have “consistent limits” of high-quality screen time (Media C. o., 2016).
• What information should and shouldn’t be shared. Consider discussing pictures, videos, name (first and last), address, school, phone number, and other private information.

• What types of media are allowed to be viewed? (Ratings, violence level, language, sexual content, etc.)

• Will social media be allowed? If allowed, how should it be used and how often?

• What devices are allowed to connect to the internet? Where must the devices be located? (living room, kitchen, family room, etc.)

• What video games are appropriate? How long are family members allowed to play each day?

Every member of the family should have a clear and age-appropriate understanding of what is and isn’t allowed while using internet-enabled devices. Families should revisit their family media plan often to help communicate, discuss, and understand each other and why internet safety is important. This will also provide the perfect time to discuss any issues or problems any family members have experienced while using the internet.

Once your family has gone over your internet and media guidelines, it is time to create a Family Internet Usage Contract. The contract should have all the guidelines the family agreed upon as well as consequences for not following those guidelines. This is a great way to help enforce the family guidelines in and away from the home. Below is an example of what an Internet Usage Contract could look like.
Internet Safety Contract

- I will meet with my family and discuss proper internet usage. I agree to follow my family guidelines including time limits, website access, and internet monitoring.

- I will not give out any personal information about myself or others, including my name, address, age, gender, school, or contact information.

- I will tell an adult immediately if I access or receive any information that makes me feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

- I will not participate in conversations that are rude, threatening, or uncomfortable in any way. I will inform my parents or another adult about any such conversations.

- I will always be respectful and follow the rules that websites have established, including those for age and proper usage.

- I will not create an account, download, or access any social media website without permission from my parents.

- I will practice proper digital citizenship at all times when online. This means that I will do my best to make a positive impact on those I interact with online.

- I will be authentic and not pretend to be someone I am not when I’m online.

- I will never send or post pictures that are not approved by my parents or do not meet my family’s standards.

- I will not bully nor tolerate cyberbullying. I will report it to a parent or trusted adult as soon as I see it.

- I will not talk to a person I don’t know offline unless I have my parents’ permission.

- I will never agree to meet with a person whom I have “met” online. I will tell my parents if a person asks to meet with me.

- I will not order items online without permission from my parents.

Signed:

_________________________________________________________________________________
(Child/Teen)

_________________________________________________________________________________
Parent

(Adapted from Girl Scout Internet Safety Pledge, The Modern Parent Internet Contract, and NetSmartz Parent Information Powerpoint, acquired January 2019)
Media literacy is the ability to study, understand, and create messages in various media such as books, social media posts, photos, movies, games, music and even school work (Alexander, 2018). This is a critical skill because we live in an image-based culture where most of the information we consume is through video, photographs, and screens.

One way to understand the media around us is to deconstruct it. Deconstructing media is when you break down the media into small bite-sized pieces to see the real message behind the flashy picture. You can do this by:

There is no way to escape it, so we must understand it.
**Asking questions**

- What methods are being used to attract attention?
- What is the overall message?
- How does this video/advertise-ment/movie/book/post/article make me feel?
- Is it truthful? Was the creator paid to tell the story a certain way? What was not said?
- Why was the app/video/book/message created? Who created it?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What techniques are used to get attention and sway opinion?

**Looking Closer**

- Think about who the intended audience is. Is there a media rating?
- Does the person look real? Do you think the picture was altered? What lifestyle is the person portraying?
- Is the author a real person? What about the experts quoted? If you did a search on the internet, could you find said experts?
- Is there anything controversial being said/displayed?
Another way you can be media literate is by being honest, attentive, clear, and responsible when creating media like an article, blog post, or even a status on social media.

- Make sure you understand the topic before you write.
- Ask yourself if you are being authentic and fair.
Think about how your post/article/media will be received by others.

Remember to be respectful, understanding, and empathetic. Don’t attack, criticize, or hurt others to get your view across.

Question your motives. Why are you creating your media? Is it to hurt someone? Inform others? Share good wholesome news?

Would you be willing to say what you write in person?
Being a great digital citizen starts with us. We need to teach our children by word and example how to behave and stay safe online. It is important to share our experiences with our children and to have an ongoing reciprocal dialogue about the online component of our lives. Below are a few helpful links to further support you on your journey to becoming a better digital citizen and safe internet user.

Safe and Savvy: The Best Internet and Phone Filters of 2018

Creating a Media Guideline for Your Family

ID Theft: Could Your Family Be At Risk?

Teaching My Children to Be Great Digital Citizens

Bringing Digital Citizenship Into Our Homes

Lesson for Families: Using Technology For Good
You can also find more information on our website at educateempowerkids.org, or in our books:

For Kids:

All books are available on our website or Amazon.
Glossary

**Deconstruct:** The act of breaking down media, such as movies, commercials, and songs, to discover the real message.

**Digital Citizenship:** Appropriate and responsible behavior with regards to technology use.

**Positive Digital Citizenship:** Using technology to make a positive impact on others (family, school, community, etc.) through tolerance, kindness, authenticity, and ingenuity.

**Internet Filters:** Also known as parental controls. A way to block unwanted information from coming into one’s digital devices from the internet.

**Media literacy:** The ability to study, understand and create messages in various media.
Citations:


