

Technology Safety

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Editor's Note: Those of us at the VIRTUS® programs have received many requests for more information regarding Internet and electronic communication awareness and safety measures. This article is the first background piece in a series which will address some facets of cyber abuse, electronic communication jargon, activities, and protective measures that should be taken by caring adults.

"My mom and dad know absolutely nothing about computers; they don't even use them where they work. I got a computer for my birthday and right away I began meeting lots of cool people online. Right after school is the best time to chat online with my friends because my mom and dad aren't home and I have absolute privacy. Unfortunately, I have had some bad experiences online. I never knew that you could meet really gross people on the computer, but I don't let that stop me from chatting with other people. I spend a lot of my time online; sometimes I wish that we'd never bought that computer."

This scenario can be an all-too-common experience for young people today. Cyber technology and the Internet offer youth an incredible world of experience. With just the click of a mouse a young person can easily research a subject for school, chat with friends, check messages, or download a song. The electronic world can be fun and educational; unfortunately, like the real world, cyber technology, electronic communication, and the Internet also have inherent dangers.

Just as we encourage children and teens to behave in certain ways when dealing with strangers or even interacting with friends, we also need to teach them how to act safely and appropriately when online or while utilizing electronic communication devices.

Unfortunately the technology gap between adults and young people is widening. Children today have grown up with computers and they think of today's technology and the many associated devices as safe and a lot of fun. Many adults, on the other hand, view computers only as work tools and don't consider this form of technology to be a source of entertainment or as a constructive way to spend time away from work. However, the best way for adults to span the technology gap is to learn to use media and communication devices as their children do. This means one should try to chat with someone while using the computer online, use an online search engine to find particular information, download some music, or send a text message on a cell phone.

Youth of today need technology-conscious adults—trusted adult with whom they have open lines of communication—to teach them how to make smart choices about whom and what they will find

when visiting the Internet. Simply communicating with kids may actually be the best weapon against the child sexual predators that frequently use the Internet to identify potential victims. Sit down with your son, daughter, or a student and ask him or her to take you on a tour of the Internet and the electronic communication world they know.

Parents and schools need to be more actively involved with young people's computer and electronic communication usage than many probably are. Unfortunately, some parents will purchase a computer, set up Internet access, and then just walk away. If one is going to have a computer with online access in the house or at a school, children need to be educated by responsible and caring adults about the many dangers. A computer with online access can be just as dangerous as a car being driven by a teen without a license. Parents should regularly ask their children about their online activity and discuss the many new types of Internet activity popular with young people. Remember, no child-safety filtering software is perfect. Young people must be taught by responsible, concerned adults to be cyber-savvy.

Teenagers who use the various online services often feel that they don't need the same controls or restrictions as younger children. Unfortunately, teens are more likely to get in trouble while online than are younger children. Online chat rooms provide teenagers the opportunity to easily reach out beyond their parents, their circle of friends, or even their own peer group. Teens are frequently unaware that chat rooms are often the most dangerous online location a person can visit.

Law enforcement in the United States observed that child molesters' use of computers and the Internet exploded in 1997. No longer did the child molester have to assume a child-related profession or lurk in parks and malls to gain access to children. A molester could now sit at a computer and roam online from chat room to chat room trolling for children and teens susceptible to victimization.

It is vital to be aware of and familiar with new and changing technology and to maintain open lines of communication with children and teens. Young people might not be receptive to the message of safety if they feel that they are more knowledgeable about certain technology issues than are the trusted adults in their lives. Also, young people can be great teachers, so it is important to let them show *you* the sites they are visiting online, whom they are talking to, and what they are doing in today's world of technology. Remember, by routinely talking with young people, setting time limits, having them take breaks from online activity, and continually educating ourselves about ever-changing technology, we are all aiding in the guidance and protection of God's children.