

INTERNET SAFETY



Law enforcement agencies throughout the country are becoming increasingly alarmed at the danger the Internet poses for children. The police departments suggest strategies for parents that are equally important for youth ministers, teachers, and others who minister to and with children, such as:

- to report threatening or obscene e-mail messages to the police.
- to include in your both congregational personnel and youth protective policies clear guidelines for acceptable computer use
- to use security software such as NetNanny or CyberPatrol to help prevent children from visiting undesirable Web sites.

Several criminal and civil cases have involved inappropriate use of the Internet by youth leaders with youngsters or by clergy who have become addicted to on-line sexual activities.

TEN ONLINE COMMANDMENTS

1. Check with online services to see if you can limit access to adult-oriented sites, chat rooms, and bulletin boards. Block instant/private messages from people you don't know.
2. Teach your kids basic online safety, just as you would teach fire and earthquake safety. Remind children not to provide personal information about themselves (such as telephone number, home address, family information, or the name of the school they attend) in e-mail messages or on forms for joining clubs, chat rooms and other Internet areas. Do not let your children have online profiles or fill out questionnaires. Caution them never to enter a private chat room.
3. Know what your children are doing on the Internet. Give them a chance to show you what they have learned or the things they like.
4. Keep the computer in a high traffic part of the house so you can monitor your children's activities without appearing to be watching over their shoulders.
5. Never allow your children to arrange an in-person meeting with someone they met online without your permission. Any meeting should occur in a public place and in your presence.
6. Ask your kids to tell you if they receive threatening, obscene, or suggestive messages. If they do, don't respond to them; instead send a copy to the online service and ask for help.
7. Share your concerns about your child's online activities directly with them. Maintaining open communication to safeguard your kids from online misuse.
8. Establish rules with your kids about their computer use. Discuss the rules, post them near the computer, and be consistent in enforcing the rules.
9. Teach your children about "netiquette" (etiquette on the Internet), so they will know how to behave appropriately on the Internet and will be able to recognize inappropriate behavior on the part of others.
10. Remember, the computer is not a babysitter. Letting children use the Internet unattended is the equivalent of dropping them off in Central Park and saying, "Go make some new friends."



PROTECTING CHILDREN ON LINE

Each year millions more people join the ranks of those who have connected their personal computers to the information highway via online services. Typically these services have been geared towards adults; however, as schools go online and children are accessing online services and bulletin boards at home, more focus is being placed on younger audiences.

Most people will have positive experiences using online services. However, for young people ages 10-17, the dark side of the Internet poses particular risks. In many cases, this age group is likely to be engaging in online discussions or "chats" that concern relationships, sexual behavior, or activities leading to personal contact. Graphic hard-core pornography, including violent, deviant material, is readily available with a few clicks of a mouse. The "teasers" from these sites require no credit card for access; Playboy's free teaser shots average 5 million hits a day. Pedophiles take Advantage of the anonymity provided by the Internet to gain the trust of unsuspecting children and exploit them by showing them Internet pornography, or by arranging to meet them off-line. Children are not emotionally prepared to make sense of the pornography they see, or to recognize the seductions by pedophiles they encounter on line.

No law protects children from pornography on line, and the FBI agents of the "Innocent Images" unit confess the possibility of their catching online predators is severely limited. Cyberspace criminals can be anywhere in the world and are particularly computer-savvy at evading detection through encoding and using seemingly innocent search words (like "toys" or "asparagus").

If the *FBI* can't do much to stop this tragedy, what can *we* do? As religious leaders, we can overcome our denial and fear -- and proactively work to create a world that is safer for youth. Our congregations can open discussion with parents and youth about sexuality, its healthy expression, and the risks of the Internet. Parents can be encouraged to improve communication with their children and to take the precautions listed on the back page. Our faith can inspire all adults to relate to youth, promote self-esteem, and build healthy relationships and boundaries. Modern technology may frustrate the 2,000 year-old Church; however, Christians are called to live out the Gospel in each decade. *This* decade includes reducing the risks children face when surfing the net.

Information obtained from *Cruising Online: Larry Magid's Guide to the New Digital Highway*

NOT SO TRIVIAL TRIVIA

36% of parents think they have little influence over whether their teens will try pot. . .

Yet kids who have learned about the risks of pot from their parents are half as likely to try smoking it.

29% of young people report learning nothing at home about the risks of marijuana. . .

Yet a major reason kids don't use drugs is fear of disappointing their parents.

(PNODA, 1998)

What would the statistics be like if "internet safety" were substituted for "pot"? We owe our children conversation, information, and healthy role modeling.