



What is the internet?

Most children at some stage will use the internet. Many parents, on the other hand, have had little or no exposure. As a result, parents often find it difficult to understand the issues involved and therefore have problems discussing them with their children. This topic aims to help parents develop a basic understanding of the internet and learn some of the terms their children may use in discussing it.

This topic covers:

- what is the internet?
- equipment and software needed to use the internet
- how to use the internet
- what parents can do

What is the internet?

The internet is a massive network of computers from around the world all connected by cable and satellite. When users are connected to the internet, they can receive text, images, video and sound on their computer from computers anywhere in the world. Just as there is a book or magazine on nearly every subject in local libraries, bookshops or newsagents, so is there information on virtually every subject on the internet. The internet is sometimes called the world wide web (www) or just 'the net'.

Being on the internet is called being on-line. Playing on the internet or hunting for information is called 'surfing' the net. In 2003 there were about 619 million internet users worldwide and 10.9 million in Australia.

Equipment and software needed to use the internet

You can use 'public access' machines to access the internet free of charge in most public libraries and for a small fee at internet cafes that can be found in most major cities. If you want to have internet access in your own home or workplace you will need:

- a computer
- a modem. This is a piece of hardware that enables your computer to connect to your Internet Service Provider (ISP) and from there to other computers.
- a telephone line. For home use, many people use their existing telephone line. If you prefer, you can get a separate telephone line connected. (You may also hear terms such as broadband, ADSL, cable, ISDN and satellite in respect to internet connections, but these technologies are at this stage not as com-

monly used for individual computer access.)

- an Internet Service Provider (ISP). ISPs are companies which act as a link between your computer and other computers. To provide this service they have sophisticated hardware and communications software. They charge users a fee for this service and usually provide some level of support.
- browser software. Browser software needs to be installed on your computer to enable you to use the world wide web. Currently the most commonly used browser software packages are Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer. Most newer computers come with browser software automatically installed.
- email software. This enables users to send messages to other users. This may come in a package with your browser software or you can buy it separately. Some commonly used emailing software packages are Netscape Messenger, Eudora, Outlook and Outlook Express.

How to use the internet

When you connect to the internet, you are effectively making a phone call. Using your modem, your computer dials out and connects through your ISP to the internet. If your ISP is in the same State as you, the cost of connection is the same as the cost of a local phone call. Your ISP charges are in addition to the phone call charge. Some ISPs have toll-free numbers for users in country and rural areas.

Once connected to the internet, there are several features of the internet you can access. You can:

- access information from the world wide web
- send and receive emails
- visit chat rooms
- use instant messaging
- join newsgroups
- view videos and / or listen to radio stations ('streaming content') (only available if you have audio or video facilities attached to your computer).

Access information from the world wide web

Any individual or organisation can create a 'website' on which they can provide any information they choose to. Information on a website is usually separated in a logical way into 'web pages'. Web pages include: information about a company and its services, promotional materials, information on any topic, reports, facts and figures, links to other relevant websites and so on. The possibilities are endless.



There are two main ways of accessing information on the world wide web. You can:

- go directly to an individual or organisation's 'website' (if you know their 'web address' or 'url' (Universal Resource Locator))
- use a search engine to locate some information you are looking for, possibly over a number of websites. To use a search engine you don't need to know any specific addresses.

If you know a web address

Each website has a unique address or url. If you know a website address, you can type it in and go directly to that individual's or company's website and access their information.

If you visit a particular website frequently, you can set up a 'bookmark' for it, so that you can easily find it again. Depending on your browser, sites you have bookmarked are listed as Bookmarks or Favorites.

Using a search engine

Search engines are tools that are available once you connect to the internet. You enter keywords (search items) relevant to the information you are looking for and the search engine produces a list of websites that contain those keywords. From the list you can select one or more website that you think will be helpful for you. Generally, the more search items you provide, the better your results will be. Some commonly used search engines are *Google* and *Alta Vista*.

Once you have found the information you want you can either look at it on screen or 'download' it. Downloading is the term used for saving information from the internet onto your own computer so that you can access it after you have disconnected from the internet. You can download documents, images, software and many other forms of information. You can also print information from the internet.

Once you have gone to a particular website, you will often find links to other websites. In this way you can jump between many websites to look for the information you want. Searching for information by going from one website to another is known as 'surfing'.

Send and receive emails

Email is an electronic form of sending a letter to another person. You can attach documents and photos which arrive at their destination in the same format as you sent them. Email is a very quick and cheap means of communicating and is very widely used. Your ISP will set up an email address for you when you join up with them. If you do not have an ISP, for example if you primarily use public access machines, you can still access emails by setting up a free 'hotmail' account.

Visit chat rooms

Chat rooms (sometimes called chat lines) are a means by which one person can talk (by typing text) to another person or to a

group of people. It's like being in a building with hundreds of rooms—you can choose a room by a topic or location and have an open discussion with the people in that room. The people you chat to are from all around the world. From a child's point of view they should be classed as strangers. Some chat rooms are monitored, which makes sure decent language and conduct are maintained. Others are not. Chat lines are very popular with children and young adults.

The *Australian Broadcasting Authority* (ABA) has released brochures containing safety tips for using internet chat rooms. The brochures cover topics such as chatting safely, selecting a filter and general internet safety. For copies of the brochures contact the ABA, either by phone on (02) 9334 7700, email: online@aba.gov.au or web: <http://www.aba.gov.au/>

Use instant messaging

By using instant messaging you can 'talk' to someone over the internet, by sending messages to and fro. Some commonly used instant messaging systems are *ICQ*, *Yahoo*, *MSN* and *AOL*.

Join newsgroups

Newsgroups are an electronic bulletin board, accessed by using the same or similar software to your email software. People join news groups of common interest and share ideas and resources on the chosen topic.

Some newsgroups are monitored and stick tightly to the topic, whilst others are not and contain adult conversation. Some newsgroups may be used by paedophiles.

View videos and/or listen to radio stations

Viewing videos on-line, listening to radio stations or playing music is making use of 'streaming content'. Streaming content means that you can view activities in other places as they happen, for example, you can see what is happening in Times Square in New York and on the NASA site you can view space shuttle activity. Or you can listen to radio programs as they are broadcast or watch music videos. Some commonly used streaming content programs are *RealMedia Player*, *Quicktime* and *Microsoft Windows Media Player*.

On-line video chat is like a chat line but with pictures and voice. A small personal video camera is attached to the computer. These cameras make it possible to see the person you are talking to. A commonly used video chat program is *ICU2*.

What parents can do

Learning more about the internet is a good first step to being able to discuss it with your children. Spending time with your children as they use the internet will help you to learn more and your children may even appreciate the opportunity to be able to teach you something. For more strategies about children and the internet, see related topic *The internet: benefits, dangers and strategies*.



For more information about Children and the Media, call the
Young Media Australia Helpline

Up to date and reliable information for parents and caregivers about the impact of the media on children.

1800 700 357

Freecall anywhere in Australia, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
Or go to the Young Media Australia website

www.youngmedia.org.au

Ordering more fact sheets

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You may also download a fact sheet order form from our web site **www.youngmedia.org.au** or browse the fact sheets in topic format online.