



The internet - benefits, dangers and strategies

Most children at some stage will use the internet. Many parents can feel they are being left behind or are out of their depth compared to their children in grappling with the internet. As with other areas of children's lives, parents have a responsibility to provide guidance and to set clear limits. This topic is aimed to assist parents in this task.

This topic covers:

- what is the internet?
- benefits of the internet
- on-line dangers for children
- 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'.

For a more detailed introduction to the internet and related terminology, see related topic What is the internet?

Benefits of the internet

The internet can provide children and adults alike with a world of exciting opportunities. It offers:

- educational games and programs
- research information for school projects and business
- the opportunity to communicate with people from all around the world
- the opportunity to share resources and ideas with people that have the same interests
- shopping around the world without leaving your computer.

The internet uses multimedia and interactivity extensively. Using multimedia means that you can access not only written words, but also pictures, music and sound effects. Interactivity means that the user can choose what they want to see just by the click of a mouse. The computer 'asks' users questions which they can then answer.

On-line dangers for children

There are no regulations or controls on the material that is placed on the internet.

While there are over 3 million perfectly safe children's sites on the net, children can unexpectedly come across material of a sexual or violent nature, language that is rude and the advertising of children's products. Quite innocently they can bring up sites that do not relate to the topic they are looking for, or someone can send them images or messages that are not appropriate.

Therefore there are many things on-line that are not suitable for children or that are cause for concern. The main dangers to children are that they may:

- access inappropriate information
- inadvertently form 'friendships' with strangers
- be subjected to advertising pressures
- risk their personal health through excessive use
- endanger their privacy by revealing person details about themselves, such as their name and address.

Access inappropriate information

The search engines on the internet provide access to many sites on a given topic. Even when children are searching for ordinary everyday topics, it is possible that they might come across sites with information and/or images that could be harmful to them.

Sexually explicit material

- this could include graphic pictures and videos intended for adults
- exposure to graphic pornography can cause emotional distress to children
- if you become aware of any child pornography online, note any relevant details and report the matter to the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). For more details see the section below Lodge complaints. Alternatively contact Crime Stoppers, on 1800 333 000 (freecall), website [<http://www.crimestoppers.com.au/>]

Violent and disturbing images

- this could include such things as crash scenes and even mortuary sites
- research has shown that violence in any form of screen media, that is, films, videos, television, computer games and the internet, can have a negative effect on children, particularly young children
- for more information about the impact of media violence, see related topics on the Young Media Australia website [<http://www.youngmedia.org.au>] or call the Young Media Australia Helpline on 1800 700 357.



Making purchases or gambling online

- children can easily come across sites which encourage them to purchase goods on-line
- on-line gambling. A credit card number is all it takes for someone to 'play'.
- using 1900 numbers. Children can inadvertently accumulate very large telephone bills in a short space of time by accessing Internet Dialer numbers that transfer them to an overseas phone line.

Incorrect and inaccurate information

- children may believe that everything they see on the internet is factual
- in fact, any person can put any information they like up on the internet and there is no guarantee that the information is accurate.

Inadvertently form 'friendships' with strangers

It is possible that children will come into contact with people who are pretending to be children but have other motives. There is a real danger that children may

- come into contact with paedophiles
- provide personal details to strangers
- arrange to meet friends they have made on the internet without really knowing who they are
- be harassed by email.

Be subjected to advertising pressures

Once on the internet, children are likely to be subjected to unsolicited advertising. This could take the form of pop-up advertisements or ads embedded into particular websites. Such advertising often has bright colourful images and catchy phrases designed to put pressure on children to purchase goods on-line. A term for unsolicited advertising on the internet, the equivalent of junk mail in your letter box, is 'spam'.

Risk their personal health through excessive use

The internet can become addictive. It is important that children do not use the internet to the exclusion of other developmentally appropriate tasks including, the need to be physically active.

Endanger their privacy

Some sites encourage children to join clubs and enter competitions. In so doing, they reveal their name and address and may become the target of unwelcome marketing and other material.

What parents can do

There are several things that you can do to help counteract the dangers of the internet while allowing your children to use its benefits:

- learn more about it yourself
- be aware of what your children are doing on the internet
- establish guidelines about safe internet use
- teach your children to be critical users of the internet
- put in place reasonable boundaries
- use blocking software or filters
- if necessary, lodge complaints.

Learn more about it yourself

The more you know about the internet, the more support you will be able to provide your children. Many local libraries, schools and other community groups offer free courses or courses at reasonable prices. Don't forget, your children may be the best teaching resource you have — sit with them and ask them to help you understand.

You don't have to become an expert, but some degree of comfort with the technology will help.

Be aware of what your children are doing on the internet

You can do this in a number of ways, including sitting with them while they are using the internet and chatting with them about what they are doing. You can also keep track of what is going on by:

- checking Bookmarks or Favorites (accessible via the icons on the menu bar) for sites your children like to visit often
- checking recently visited sites (using Options, Preference or History)
- use monitoring software. One such product, released in 2003 is called SimGuard. This product enables parents to keep a record of a child's web browsing habits. The recommended way of using this software is to discuss its use with your children in the context of keeping them safe. For more information go to the SimGuard website: <http://www.simguard.net>
- email monitoring software is also available. KidSafe is an example of email monitoring software. It allows parents to filter email for their children to block out spam, viruses and offensive email. For more information go to the KidSafe website: <http://www.kidsafe.net.au/>

Establish guidelines about safe internet use

There are several practical steps you can take to safeguard what happens in your home in respect of the internet:

- keep the computer that is connected to the internet in a family area, not behind closed doors
- only allow your children to use chat groups or newsgroups or send email messages with your permission and under your supervision
- talk to your children's school about their on-line policy; you may be able to put their safeguards into practice at home
- select a reliable service provider and discuss children's on-line safety with them.

Teach children to be critical users of the internet

One of the best ways of protecting your children is to teach them to be critical users of the internet. Teach your children:

- never to give others their name, the names of their friends, or fill in questionnaires with their personal details
- never to send images of themselves over the net as they may be used for other purposes
- about 'stranger danger' as it applies to the internet. If a child or young adult wishes to meet new on-line 'friends' in person, make sure you supervise the meeting.
- never to respond to messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, or threatening. Encourage your children to report such experiences to you. If they do, discuss these matters calmly with your child and forward a copy of any such messages to your service provider, asking for assistance.
- to only use monitored chat lines designed for their own age group
- to always be themselves when on-line
- to be critical in respect of 'information' found on the internet. Information on the internet comes from many sources and not all is reliable.

Use blocking software or filters

Blocking software or filters are the names used for programs that you can install and use on your computer to control the information that is accessed by children whilst on the internet.

Blocking software:

- can block or minimise the risks of harmful violent material, sexually explicit material and chat lines being displayed on your computer
- is inexpensive and available from most computer suppliers or straight from the provider's sites

For more information about blocking software, see the related web topic and Fact Sheet Internet filtering software—what it is and how to use it on the Young Media Australia website [www.youngmedia.org.au] or call the Young Media Australia Helpline on 1800 700 357.

Whilst blocking software is an excellent idea for some age groups it is not foolproof and some computer aware children can still get around these programs. Blocking software goes hand in hand with parental supervision and is no substitute for it.

Put in place reasonable boundaries

Discuss with your children what you consider to be reasonable boundaries on use of the internet. Depending on the age of your child, negotiate these boundaries with them. For example:

Set a daily or weekly time limit. The amount of time you decide upon will depend on the age and developmental stage of your child. Remember that the internet can be addictive and that you may need to encourage your child to keep a balance with other activities, including being physically active.

Only allow internet access in public spaces so that you can keep an eye on what they are accessing and discuss it with them if necessary

Make it clear to them what materials are unacceptable.

Make rules about on-line shopping, downloading material, responding to unsolicited advertisements and so on.

Lodge complaints

If you think you or your child have come across something illegal on the internet, you can lodge a complaint with the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA).

The ABA has the oversight of internet content matters, and will investigate complaints referred to it in relation to specific web sites. For information about how to complain to the ABA, call (02) 9334 7700, or visit their website [<http://www.aba.gov.au>]. There is a proforma email ABA Hotline that you can use to help you lodge your complaint.

The ABA will investigate, and if it is found that the material is illegal, the ABA can issue a 'take down' notice to the relevant Internet Service Provider, requiring them to remove the website.



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

Young Media Australia has over sixty printed fact sheets about the impact of media on children.

To get a list of available Young Media Australia fact sheets, or to order your copies call the
Young Media Australia Helpline
1800 700 357

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.