

Internet Predators, FaceBook, MySpace, IM...

AHHHHHHHH!

What's a parent to do??

Well the first thing is ...deep breath...relax. Most of us now have computers in our homes maybe even two or three. Our children and grandchildren are learning to use the computer at a very early age. My 4 year old grandson LOVES www.nickjr.com. Kids love to go online. There is so much stuff to explore and learn. If this is true in your home, I am sure you have thought, *all that stuff is great but how do I protect my kids or teenagers from all the bad stuff on the Internet?* We all know it is far too easy to fall into questionable material while just innocent surfing. I have listed some tips below to help make your family's Internet surfing stress free! (or at least add some degree of comfort). In this article I am not going to deal with anti-virus software, except to say, get it and keep it up to date!

I am going to be talking about instant messaging and the personality pages, like MySpace and Facebook,. If you don't know what either of these are, get your young person to give you a tour. Believe me, they know about it. They may already have a page and you don't even know it. These are web sites where individuals can show their personalities, their likes and dislikes, who their friends are, and post pictures. The problem with these types of sites is older children and teenagers tend to give away too much information on these pages that predators look for. Oh yeah, I might mention that that 14 year old girl named Buffy your teenage daughter met on her Myspace page and is now chatting with, is really a 45 year old man, named Bubba.

1) **TRUST!** Now you might think that's an odd tip, but the trust and relationship you have with your children really is the gauge you should use to decide how much or what type of Internet security you need. The first thing you should do is sit down with the young person that is using the computer and tell them the rules. For instance, you may not want them to have a Myspace or Facebook page, or if they do, it must be private and have a password. Either way tell them your intentions, so there is no mistake. You may even have them sign an Internet Safety Agreement. If you would like one of those, email me here at Computer Connections and I will send you one. The bottom line is, trust is where you begin.

2) **Information** – It is important that you talk to your children about what information they can give out on the Internet and what they can't. Today there are many websites that are phishing sites, yeah like fishing. That is what they are doing, trolling for information, like credit card numbers, social security numbers, phone numbers and house numbers. We have seen some adults fooled by these phishing sites. So don't think that your child couldn't be fooled into keying in their social security number or your address in response to an email or instant message. It happens every day. Talk to them about things they are NEVER to give to ANYONE on the Internet, regardless of the story or how cute the web page or email is. Remember that talk you had with them about NEVER talking to strangers even if they looked nice and they needed help finding their lost puppy? Same thing!

3) Internet monitoring - There are many different varieties of Internet monitoring software, from shielding software to keystroke logging software. Shielding software would be programs like NetNanny and Cyber Patrol. These programs do a good job limiting the sites your child can surf to. They also block questionable content that may be keyed into a search engine like Google. You can set the parameters very easily to allow as little or as much content as your want your child to have. You also have a master password that will allow you to bypass the shield if you need to. These programs work well with younger children and even young teenagers. They may be too restrictive however for older teens, who you may want to be able to chat with their friends and do research without bugging you to key in the master password. Again the trust factor comes into play. We have found that keystroke logging software usually comes into play after the teenager has violated the house surfing rules or the computer becomes so badly infected with viruses or spyware that professional cleaning of the hard drive is necessary. Keystroke logging software tracks every website and chat session the computer goes to. Usually this is done in stealth mode, where the user of the computer doesn't even have to know they are being monitored. The software can be configured to email a copy of the session once or several times a day to the person monitoring. It will even send a text message to the person monitoring if a certain keystroke sequence is used. Of course, using this type of software is a personal decision you have to make, again the trust thing. If you need more information on this type of monitoring software, contact us at Computer Connections.

4) Be Nosey - We all want to trust our children. We all want to believe they would never go to "those" kinds of web sites. Word to the wise, almost everyday we have to disappoint parents and show them the places, times, and frequency someone in their home has been to pornographic or violent web sites. Not to mention the number of personality sites that has been visited. It will happen, kids are curious. Peer pressure is great. The Internet of today is the Playboy under the mattress of my day, multiplied by 1000. Don't let them password you out of their login. Learn how to read the cache, cookies, and history of the computer. Don't let them delete the history files, make a rule that only you can delete them. Consider putting the computer your kids use in a central location in your home instead of the privacy of their bedroom. Be vigilant, look at the places they surf, know who each person is in their IM buddy list. Now is the PERFECT time to use that phrase you always hated, *it's MY house and as long as you are in MY house we play by MY rules!*

These are just a few of the tips and techniques you can use to keep your kids safe on the Internet. No, they may not like it, but they aren't going to like everything you do anyway so if you have to make a stand this is a great place to start. You talk to your kids about strangers, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and the rules of the road when they learn to drive in an effort to keep them safe and healthy. Talk to them about the Internet! The Internet is a wonderful tool, a great way to communicate, and a super place to learn. Don't let the bad stuff out there keep you and your kids away. Play it smart and make you and your kids computing experience a safe and positive one!