

A Grown-up's Guide to the (Cyber) Universe

Any adult with children beyond the nappy stage is undoubtedly concerned about the influence and temptations of the rapidly developing technological world. Once, we tried to keep our children safe on the street and in our homes; now they can be reached—silently, secretly—through mobile phone and computer, by text, by email, by a quick encounter in a chat room, a photo on a phone. And not everyone in cyber space is there for friendship's sake. The headlines are full of stories of young people who followed their natural curiosity and trust too far. In addition, this is a world that belongs to any young person who is savvy about the computer and other devices—usually in a way that an adult would be unaware of—and easily outmanoeuvred.

As with any issue, building the kind of respect and trust between adult and child that leads to good communication begins long before the issues do—but even with this basis, children who reach the age of ten or eleven and beyond are anxious to have their own freedoms, their own worlds, their own secrets even in the best of times. And with the cyber-scene changing with every season, and new adaptations and fads driving it, it takes an effort to stay clued up about cyberspace.

In fact, the extreme incidents are rare; what's common, and what this mostly-supervised space lends itself to very easily, is bullying. Children come to Kidscape who have been driven to suicide attempts by mass attacks delivered round the clock by text and email. Once, home was at least a place safe from peers' bullying; now there is no protection for cyber-stealth. And making sure your child does not participate with the bullies—too tempting when all is secret, and a push of a button sends hate through the air—is important.

Keep these ideas in mind from the very beginning, when the computer and mobile are delivered. And discussion about use should begin even before that time. Set up computers out in the open. The chance of observation may keep some users on track.

- Work together to set up some guidelines, and talk about dangers. We have included some good-use-guides for different age groups. They can be printed off and kept near the computer. Be sure to keep them current.
- Establish a family email account that all can use for sign-ins; for instance, at gaming websites.
- Consider using a filtering device.
- Emphasize that privacy is vital. Names, addresses, pin numbers, but also photographs and other clues are not for the internet. Discuss the dangers—there are no secrets in cyberspace. Use privacy settings on social networking sites. And remind them that everything is traceable.

- Teach your young people to trust instincts that suggest there is danger. If children want to test a website or chat room visitor, see what happens when they suggest they are discussing things with their parents.
- Don't delete search and chat histories, in case there are problems—printing off messages is good evidence.
- Know how to file a complaint with the ISP or a mobile phone company, an IM account or a video-site. If you feel a threat is dangerous—as in bullying messages—and would ordinarily contact the police or the school, follow through. However, young people are traditionally very reluctant to admit to being bullied. This is even more the case when they fear having their access to mobile or internet removed.
- Know the typical behaviours that may signal a child is being bullied. And bullies may also exhibit unusual behaviour.
- Threatening or abusive messages or pictures, sent to a classmate or anyone else, criminal codes, and may incur a fine or even imprisonment. Talk to the police.
- Remind them that they should be respectful in what they send on the internet—words sound different when written, not spoken—or when published for everyone to see. If they are receiving bullying messages, **DO NOT RESPOND**. Bullies get their enjoyment from seeing a target's distress. But do talk to an adult!
- Finally, try to stay current! Browse the internet; try some games and chat rooms. Slang, fads, games can all change constantly.

This information has been supplied by Say No to Bullying. More information can be obtained from their site: <http://www.saynotobullying.org.uk/>