

[<<Back](#)

Experts Offer New Advice on Keeping Kids Safe Online

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It's every parent's concern about the Internet: Your child tells you that they're being bullied or harassed online -- or worse. Sometimes the perpetrator may be a stranger, but more often than not, it's someone they know. Even someone from their school. What do you do?

Believe it or not, having your child confide in you about the problem may be half the battle. "Only 10 percent of children actually tell someone when they're being harassed," says Anne Collier, co-director of ConnectSafely, a web site for parents, teens and educators alike, about the impact of social web sites. "They are reluctant to tell us because they think we'll overreact and take away their online privileges. But overreacting won't solve the problem."

Here are some real-life situations you may encounter regarding your child's safety on the Internet, along with some expert advice on how to handle them.

Q: What should I do if someone creates a fake social networking profile using my child's name and photos?

A. "First of all, you have to step in and help," advises Larry Rosen, a psychology professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills, and author of *Me, MySpace and I: Parenting the Net Generation* (Palgrave Macmillan). "Contact whatever company hosts the social networking pages, which is typically MySpace or Facebook. As long as you contact them, they will take the profile down. That has to happen immediately."

In order to be a good parent of a child in the Internet age, you need to combine proactive and reactive parenting skills, Rosen says. On the proactive side, you need to understand enough about the world of social networking to anticipate potential problems such as this and talk to your child about them in advance. Make sure you leave lines of communication open so that your child will turn to you when she can't solve an online dilemma alone.

On the reactive side, parents need to also go further and ask the social networking site for the name of the person who posted any false information about the child. "If it's someone that your child knows, obviously you need to go further by either going through the school system or going through the parents," Rosen says. "If it's serious in terms of threats, you have to go to bat for the child and go to the authorities."

Q. My son is getting threatening instant messages from different screen names. What should I do?

A. "Don't react initially," says Collier. "Very often the bully is looking for a reaction because that is what empowers the bully. Don't retaliate either, because that's when the victim becomes the bully."

So what should you do? Save the evidence. Whether it's an instant message or text message, copy the offending material and paste into a Word document in case you need to have something to show a school administrator or the authorities later.

Collier says that studies have found that it's more likely the harasser is someone your child knows rather than a complete stranger. If you find out another child is sending the messages, she advises that you speak with that child's parent. "If you're not comfortable doing that, then

talk to school authorities," she adds.

Also, tell your child to block the person who is sending the messages. If it's someone on their friends' list on a social messaging site or a buddy list on an instant messaging program, most programs allow you to block or delete certain users from those lists.

Q. My child spends hours on Internet gaming sites. Is this dangerous?

A. If your child has addictive or compulsive tendencies and is spending a lot of time online, you do need to be concerned. "Some games employ technology that makes them increasingly immersive over time," Collier says. "Parents should be aware, not just that the story line is immersive, but about the way story lines are designed to pull them in and hold them there."

You should always keep tabs on what your child is doing online. If gaming is new to you, ask them to show you how it's done and explain the story lines. Your child may enjoy showing you the ropes.

Q. What should I do if I find my teen looking at inappropriate content on the web?

A. If you're a proactive parent, you already laid down the law to your teen about what kind of sites they're allowed to visit on the Internet, Rosen says.

But if you haven't had that conversation and you catch your teen visiting some sites you consider inappropriate -- for example, pornography or gambling -- it's important to be firm about the rules now. "Set limits and boundaries," he says. "Tell them, 'You may find this interesting and fun, but I think it's inappropriate and I don't want you doing it.'"

Let your kids know what the consequences are if they violate those boundaries. Immediate consequences may include that you move the computer to a public area of the home or that you have access to their social networking pages, their instant messages and their Internet histories whenever you deem fit.

If your child violates these rules, you may want to take away Internet or computer access for a few hours or a few days, Rosen says. "If you're not sure that your child understands the consequences, write them down," he adds.

Q. My child accepts every friend who contacts her. How can I help her learn to recognize an online predator?

A. It's true that many children simply accept anyone who asks to be their friend because that's one of the goals of social networking -- to build up lists of friends. Rosen says to be proactive and talk to your child about warning signs before you allow her to use the Internet, email, social networking or other interactive media.

For example it's important that you reinforce that strangers shouldn't be addressing them inappropriately or asking to meet in person. "Let's suppose that someone on MySpace sends you a request to be a friend," Rosen says. "Ask your child, 'How would you handle this?'"

Give your child examples of inappropriate language people might use to manipulate them. Inform your kids that this kind of social interaction is not to be accepted. In these situations, Rosen advises that your child should simply respond with "No, I don't want you to be my friend."

Q. My daughter says someone posted an embarrassing video of her on YouTube. How can I get it taken down?

A. Contact YouTube and request that the video be removed, Collier advises. The problem, she points out, is that this isn't necessarily a permanent solution since whoever posted the video can just repost it on that site or another web site. While most web sites have abuse reporting tools and processes, there may be occasions when you should call police, such as if the video contains nudity. "That's technically child pornography... and law enforcement has to be involved," Collier

says. "If it is distributed, it's a felony."

To prevent such a situation from occurring, you should talk with your children about protecting their reputation online. "Kids need to be aware of who has camera phones around them, whether it's at a party or football game or someplace where adults aren't present," Collier says. "They need to ask themselves, 'Am I in a compromising position? How would I look in a photo in this situation?'"

The experts' final advice: The key to keeping your children safe online is to be a constant presence and to foster communication so that they turn to you in a pinch.

Additionally, there is a new service that enables parents to monitor a child's activities online. You can track how long your children spend online, which sites they visit, which social networks they frequent and who they communicate with via Instant Messaging (IM). You can also set limits on things like search terms, time spent online and sites they can access. (For more information, click on the info box to the right.)

"If you're an engaged parent and have healthy communication with your child, you're probably not going to see evidence of serious risk in your child's online experience," Collier says. "You're more likely to see the standard social ups and downs that kids have to deal with online and offline."

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