

Internet Safety

The issue isn't trust. The issue is curiosity, childhood curiosity. It is the kind of curiosity that can either lead to good things... or danger.

The children were ages 11, 12 and 13. They came from respected families. They had never been in trouble before. They are good students. They were caught in sex acts between themselves uncharacteristic of children their ages. They learned their tricks from the Internet. They had seen thousands of perverse and sexually graphic images and their sheer numbers led the children to believe this was normal. They had to try it.

Our lives have changed. With the Internet we have invited the world into our homes: the good, the bad and the ugly. In less than seconds we can be transported around the world to see and hear things otherwise unavailable. There are remarkable advantages. We can communicate with friends and loved ones easily. We have access to information and education. The downside is that with any wrong turn we can be exposed to dangerous information, ideas, images, behaviour and can even be lured to our death.

These warning signs could signal a problem for your child and the Internet:

1. Spending increased time on-line to the exclusion of other friends and prior preferred activities.
2. Surfing the Internet with the door closed and when you approach, you hear a flurry of mouse-clicks as your child quickly deletes information or changes web pages.
3. An increase in sexualized behaviour or talk of adult on-line friends, particularly if this leads to meeting unknown persons.

Think of the Internet as a big lake. There are shallow spots and deep spots. You would never throw your child into the lake without supervision, without learning to swim or without learning of the dangerous areas. You would never let your children swim in the dark. Like learning to swim, these strategies may protect your child from harm on the Internet:

1. Purchase and install "blocking software". Such software prevents targeted web sites from

appearing on your computer. This tends to work better for younger children who are more apt to stumble on a pornographic web site than search for them directly. Ask at your local computer store for a recommendation on which software to use.

2. Keep your computer in a public area in your house such as the kitchen, family room or hallway. Children will be embarrassed if sexual content appears and will not want to be caught in open territory with it on the screen. Porn needs secrecy to survive. No secrecy, no porn.
3. If the computer is to remain in your child's room, the door must be open when the Internet is in use.
4. Check the Temporary Internet Files and History Folder on the computer. The rule is, no deleting these files. Parents are advised to view these files periodically. These files will show you exactly what has been viewed and which web sites were accessed. They even will show date and time. No files, no computer.

Remember, safety on the Internet is not a matter of trusting your child. It is a matter of understanding childhood curiosity and the trouble that it can cause. It is always up to the parents to protect children from harm and learn the strategies to do so. Our mission is to grow them up safely. This includes the Internet.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report.

Search Gary's name on GOOGLE.COM to view his many articles or visit his website. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. His services include counseling, mediation, assessment and assessment critiques.

Buy the book:

To order Direnfeld's book, *Raising Kids Without Raising Cane*, send a cheque or money order in the amount of \$12.00 to: Interaction Consultants, 20 Suter Crescent, Dundas, Ontario, L9H 6R5

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