

Crabby's tips for Internet safety



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The Crabby Office Lady

Internet safety is a big topic these days. We hear about it through the media and from our kids' teachers; if you're like me, you spend a good deal of time thinking about it. The goal of this week's column is to provide you with resources you can use to ensure that you have the tools you need to keep your kids safe.

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When automobiles were first invented, they weren't generally available to the majority of working people. Therefore, safety was not of the utmost importance, because, well, there weren't that many cars on the road and accidents were few and far between (or so I'm guessing since I didn't really find much information about that).

But, as time went by and cars became our default mode of transportation, the car makers and legislators discovered that safety for drivers, passengers, and the cars themselves was key to making sure that cars remained a viable form of transportation. And when that light bulb went off, we saw the advent of seat belts, brake lights, air bags, anti-lock braking systems, child car seats, and other safety-related inventions that are now just part of our automobile lexicon.

We can apply the same idea to the Internet: Before it was just a part of our everyday lives, no one envisioned how far-reaching its influence would become and the safety issues that would ensue. But times have changed.

Everyone is doing it: The Internet

The reason I decided to write this column — which has little or nothing to do with my usual topic, Microsoft Office — is because I have a young daughter, and also a brother, sister, and friends all with young children, and all of us are starting to talk about how to make sure our kids are safe when they're using the Internet. It's a hot topic these days, and while it may seem that it's an almost impossible task to control how your kids are using the Internet, it's really not.

So now we get to have a little chat about "Internet safety." While the phrase itself could mean any number of things — from using the keyboard safely (ergonomics) to making sure that you're using a power surge protector to hook up your computer, your modem, your router, and so on — this week's column is about making sure your children are using the Internet safely. While I am not an expert on this subject, there are several groups here at Microsoft and other companies and governmental and non-governmental organizations with whom we partner that *are* experts.

Rather than just regurgitate what they've so carefully and thoughtfully written throughout several different Web sites, this week's column provides several resources to help you and your children learn about how to be safe, recognize users exhibiting predatory behavior, and even how to create a "family contract" so that your kids and you are on board together regarding how and when they can use the Internet. I'll leave it up to you to do a bit of reading and researching (and I think you'll be glad you did).

Internet safety: Microsoft resources

On Microsoft.com, I found more than 50 links to resources that can help you ensure the safety and security of your kids online. I've pulled out 10 to highlight today, and the last one, [A guide to your child's safe use of the Internet](#), links off to all the resources I'm providing today and many more. I suggest you look at all the links I've offered, pick and choose the ones most appropriate for you and your children, and then have a frank family meeting so that your kids know that you're not just setting them free in the 'Net wilderness. You wouldn't let your 5-year-old go to the mall alone, would you? Of course you wouldn't. And you wouldn't send your 11-year-old off to meet a "new friend" at this new friend's house, without knowing anything about this new friend, his parents, where he lives, and so on, now would you? Again, of course you wouldn't. Same goes with Internet use. While you may think that your child is safe browsing the Internet while in the comfort of your own home, the Internet is a way to invite unwanted guests, language, and ideas *into* your home. As creepy as that sounds, I'm afraid it's the truth.

You need to know what your kids are doing, with whom, and when — whether they're at the mall, at a friend's house down the street...or logged on to a computer sitting five feet from you.

- [**Using family contracts to help protect your kids online**](#)

Creating a "code of conduct" for the entire family is a great way to make sure that everyone knows what they should or shouldn't be doing online. You can create a different contract for each kid, depending on his or her age, and then get them to sign it. That way, when rules are broken, you can refer back to the contract and teach them about the importance of not just following rules but also about recognizing contractual obligations. (And hey, you never know — you may just plant that first seed for a burgeoning attorney.)

- [**Security at home: Child safety online**](#)

This page links off to a bevy of resources for both you and your child. Some of the links are ones I've discussed in the column, but there are many more that you should explore, such as how to deal with online bullies, how to blog safely, and how to tell if your kid is addicted to the Internet (it can happen at any age, I'm told).

- [**Online predators: What you can do to minimize the risk**](#)

There is probably nothing more frightening than the thought of a child predator knocking on your kid's computer door. And I hate to say it, but it's more common than you might think. The anonymity of the Internet means that trust and intimacy can develop quickly online. You can help protect your kids by becoming aware of the risks involved with online communication and also teach them how to recognize when it's happening.

- [**Kids and the Internet: Frequently asked questions**](#)

This page offers some ideas on what to discuss with your kids to teach them about using the Internet more safely. From teaching them how to trust their instincts to showing them how to choose a name and create a profile for chat rooms that don't reveal any personal information, this FAQ is a great resource for you and all of your kids, no matter their age or Internet expertise.

- [**Internet gambling and your kids**](#)

It may seem strange to mention online gambling when we're talking about children, but I can tell you that it does happen. Kids love games and sometimes, when they're searching for new games and online activities, they may run across gambling sites. While most games for youngsters are legal, gambling is not (no surprise there). This page helps you teach your kids about what gambling is, how to recognize when they've landed on an illegal gambling site, and that they are NOT allowed to use your credit card, for any reasons whatsoever.

- [**Helping kids deal with hateful content on the Internet**](#)

We all talk to our kids about bullies at school. And I've recently noticed that there are many books about the subject now too, resources that just weren't available when I was a kid. (And yes, I was someone who was occasionally bullied; I was NOT the bully, as opposite as that may seem). But "hateful content" on the Internet goes much further than the bullying of yore. There are many racist, homophobic, sexist, and other hate-promoting sites on the Internet and it's not uncommon to run across them while you're doing a harmless Web search. As parents, we need to protect our younger kids from this hateful content and also teach our older kids how to think critically about online content and what to look for when identifying whether a Web site might be a hate Web site. This Web page offers tips about how to do that using open communication with your kids, employing filtering software, and helping your kids identify hateful content and symbols on Web sites — for example, swastikas, derogatory references to race or sexual orientation, and cartoon depictions of various ethnic and racial groups.

- [**A parent's guide to online safety: Ages and stages**](#)

This page is particularly useful because it focuses on online safety tips for kids at different stages: You get tips for the 2- to 4-year-olds (who are probably sitting on your lap at this point, browsing through family photos); the 5- to 6-year-olds (who are starting to want to go online by themselves); the 7- to 8-year-olds (who may be trying to figure out what they can get away with, not knowing that you can be pretty sneaky yourself); the 9- to 12-year-olds (who may already know more than you do but who still need guidance from you and from our resources); and the 13- to 17-year-olds (who are so technically savvy that it may be a bit of a challenge to figure out how to limit what they're doing and when).

But this site, called "Ages and Stages," offers a huge array of tips, ideas, and resources to help you with your kids, no matter what age or what stage they're at.

- [**10 things you can teach your kids to improve their Web safety**](#)

The Internet can be a great place for kids to learn, be entertained, chat with friends from school, and simply relax and explore. Before you set your child free to go exploring online, make sure you establish a set of rules for them to follow (such as never giving out their personal information and respecting others' online property), and be sure to let them know that not everything they read on the 'Net is true. This Web page offers 10 really good things to discuss with your kids so that they know you're interested in their safety.

- [**Video: Teaching your kids about online safety**](#)

Watch this video to find out more about what you can do to help keep your kids safe as they explore the Internet. It talks about how to avoid pornography, how to avoid viruses, how to keep the communication lines open with your kids, and why to never share personal information (meaning what is considered private) online. This video covers most of the topics I've covered here...and more. The woman in the video is speaking from the point of view of a parent and she knows from whence she speaks.

- [**A guide to your child's safe use of the Internet**](#)

This last link is an overview of what Internet safety is all about. It links off to resources such as [America Links Up: A Kids Online Teach-In](#), a broad-based public awareness campaign to ensure that every child in America has a safe, educational, and rewarding experience online. This Microsoft page also links off to many of the resources I've provided for you in this column.

So, please take the time to read through the content contained on these pages thoroughly. You know the old saying, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

"My definition of a free society is a society where it is safe to be unpopular." — Adlai E. Stevenson, Jr.

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the [Did this article help you?](#) feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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