

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Danger Zone: Keeping Your Kids Safe Online

If you're a parent or caregiver now, chances are you'd never even heard of the Internet when you were a kid. And when it came to making friends, you most likely had to go out and meet other kids the "old fashioned way"—in person. But times have changed and with kids accessing the Internet at younger and younger ages, it's not uncommon to hear of a four-year-old who can surf the web to find his favorite game before even being able to read.

The Internet can provide endless fun for kids through online learning tools, games, social networking and information-sharing. Although the Internet does offer new and exciting experiences for children, it has its dangers and parents need to know how to protect their kids from online strangers and harmful images and information. Keep your kid's out of harm's way when online and:

Keep it out in the open. Keeping your family's computer in a public, common space in your house means you can watch over the content your child is viewing. Not only is this good for protecting kids, but it also creates opportunities for interaction. Take an interest in what your child is exploring. Offer to play a game or ask about a favorite topic. You'll get a glimpse into your child's interests while also staying on top of their online activities.

Watch your watch. While keeping the computer close and in the open helps you stay aware of the content your child is viewing, so too does setting a time limit and "online hours" for computer use. If you're in bed at 10 p.m. and the kids are up surfing alone, you can't monitor what they're viewing or who they're chatting with. Also, it's much less tempting for kids to go hunting for bad content if mom or dad might walk into the room at any moment.

Install "eyes in the back of your head." There are many options for parental monitoring software or blocking software that let you track online activities and block suspicious content from reaching kids' eyes or ears. Get online yourself and do some research to find out what options work best for you. Just remember, nothing replaces an attentive and involved parent or caregiver.

Stay connected. Do your kids want to join a social networking site? If you feel the site is age-appropriate, help them set up privacy settings to ensure personal information cannot be seen by the general public—such as an e-mail address, home address or phone number. Sign up yourself and become one of their contacts so you can see what others can see and remain aware of the comments and friends your kids are making.

Web-proof your children. Whether it's a stranger offering candy on the street or a stranger offering friendship on a social networking site—the same answer applies. No! Let kids know that looks can be deceiving and that some people may pretend to be something they are not to reel kids in. People can become anyone online and your child needs to know that a stranger is a stranger, whether it's an in-person encounter or not. Remind them to never give out personal details—their last name, addresses, phone number or the school they go to—to anyone.

Keep it real. Talk to your kids about internet safety and take an interest in their online friends and activities so they feel you care. This can help them become comfortable sharing with you when they are faced with questions, witness or experience cyber bullying, or have seen something inappropriate online.

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As a parent it can be a challenge to keep an eye open at all times when a child is surfing the web. But by implementing some of the simple strategies above, you'll help maximize kids' enjoyment, get to know your children better, and ensure they stay out of harm's way online.