

Safe Web Sites for Kids

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Summary Safe Web Sites for Kids

"Where did you find that Web site?"

That's a question many parents have asked, usually after a scenario like one of the following: You discover your 7 year-old is shooting gorillas with a laser gun; your 11 year-old is watching nude models; your 9 year-old has joined a "game club" for \$29.95 a month; or your 13 year-old is chatting with 40 year-olds.

Safe, appropriate Web sites

Your kids, in other words, have found some Web sites you wish they hadn't.

Instead of asking where they found those Web sites, ask yourself: how can I make sure the sites my kids visit are appropriate and safe?

Generally, there are three approaches that will help you ensure that your kids are visiting and interacting with appropriate Web sites: active involvement and vigilance; use of parental control software; and using lists of Web sites that are recommended for kids to determine what will be ok in your home. You may find that some combination of these approaches will work well for you and your kids.

Active interest and involvement

Your active interest and involvement in your kids' Internet use is the best way to know where your kids are going and what they're doing online. When they know you care and are paying attention, they are likely to be more careful and make better decisions. Kids who talk to their parents about Internet safety are 6 times less likely to become victims.

Look, ask, listen

Let your kids know you're interested in what they're doing online. Look over their shoulder. Ask them to show you the Web sites they and their friends like to visit, ask what they like about the site, how the sites work, and ask how they learned about it.

Dig a little deeper

With a little investigation you can learn a lot about a Web site, so that you can determine its appropriateness for your child. Here are some examples:

- **How much information must a child provide to register?** If your child has already set up their account, set up your own account to review the experience. If the required information includes home address, phone number, age, or sex, you may want your child to avoid that Web site.
- **What are the privacy policies?** Before your child provides any personal information to a Web site, you should read the site's privacy policy and make sure it has these four basic elements -

- What information the site will collect and how it will be used
- Ability to choose whether your information can be collected or used
- Access to the information you provide so you can correct inaccuracies, or remove it from the site
- Security to protect your information from loss, misuse, or alteration

Federal law requires that sites aimed at children must post privacy policies. Any site without a posted privacy policy is a site to avoid.

- Is there a parental policy? A good policy for any site marketing itself to children is to address parental concerns. Some examples are links to parental information, help removing a child's account if the parent asks them to and information about how they protect your child's privacy.
- **Is the content appropriate?** Does the site include content that is not appropriate for children, i.e., sexual content, violence, or topics and language that are too advanced? You may have to click down a level or two to answer these questions. Or you might want to sit with your child and watch them play for a while. For example, online games can include inappropriate content, violence, or sexual graphics that may not be evident without playing the game.
- **Is chat included?** Some sites aimed at kids include an online chat or instant messaging component. If it does, you'll have to decide whether chat (or the site in question) is appropriate for your child. Who is allowed to chat with your child? Some sites restrict chat to people you know in the offline world, while other sites provide chat features allowing you to restrict or turn off chat.
- **Pay for play?** Often, Web sites require kids to pay a fee to join or to get access to additional features. Yet others offer products for sale. Your point of control is your credit card, which will be required to make these purchases. Keep it in your pocket until you know for sure what product or service your child wants to buy. You should also be aware that some sites provide incentives for longer playtime on the site in the form of site-specific "currency". If your child is spending more time than you'd like online, this could be a cause.

Parental controls

This is called letting the technology work for you. Internet security software, modern operating systems, browsers, and search engines all offer some level of parental controls. Internet security software, typically, offers the most complete controls. Parental controls enable you to block access to specific Web sites or adjust settings that will filter out inappropriate content according to parameters that you set. Symantec's [Norton Internet Security™](#) and [Norton 360™](#) products have a [free parental control](#) component that can be added to the product. Your operating system may allow you to set times and durations that your children can

use the computer. In addition, there are special child-safe browsers and search engines available that will only visit or return child-safe Web sites. Keep in mind, however, that parental control software is additive to parental involvement, it is not a replacement.

You need to stay alert and on top of your child's browsing habits. Remember to **check the computer's history** and make sure there aren't signs that your child is erasing or clearing the history to prevent you from seeing evidence of visits to forbidden sites. Check the cookies on your computer too. Remember, your child's email is a source of good information on where your child is setting up accounts and every informed parent knows, they must have access to their child's email for this and similar reasons.

Safe Web site lists

To help you find great Web sites for kids, there are a number of sites that specialize in developing lists of safe, fun, and educational Web sites for kids. Here a few of the better known sites:

- www.ala.org/greatsites — The American Library Association offers an extensive searchable list of kid safe educational and fun Web sites for children of various ages. Sites are listed in categories such as animals, arts, math, reference, and science, plus sub-categories including, music, games, and entertainment.
- www.kidsites.com — KidSites.com is a commercial site with a list of Web sites and activities in a broad range of categories. It includes information for parents and teachers.
- <http://safekids.com> — SafeKids.com provides a kid safe search engine.