

Common Sense on Digital Life

What's the Issue?

We may think of our kids' online, mobile, and technological activities as "digital life," but to them it's just life. In their world, being able to connect and communicate 24/7 from just about any location is normal – and expected! Between kindergarten and fifth grade, kids go through rapid growth in learning about many topics, including digital media technologies. From playing games on their mom or dad's cell phone, to learning how to point and click a mouse, to navigating online by themselves, kids this age are participating in a connected culture.

Why Does It Matter?

Young children need to learn early how to make good choices so they can take advantage of the powerful technologies available to them. And to make these good choices, kids need parental guidance.

The stakes are high because our kids' technological abilities can be greater than their maturity and judgment. Having unrestricted access to information and people can result in gaining a wealth of information and experiences. But it can also mean accessing inappropriate content and making inappropriate contact with others. The difference between a great experience and an iffy one lies in the decisions kids make. Just as kids learn to eat properly, swim safely, or drive a car carefully, they need to know how to live in the digital world responsibly and respectfully. Their ultimate success depends on their abilities to use digital media to create, collaborate, and communicate well with others. Those who master these skills in using digital tools will benefit from the digital world's awesome power.

common sense says

Use bookmarks and safe search. Teach your child to bookmark his or her favorite sites. This way, your child is less likely to go somewhere online you don't want. Use safe search options on Web browsers, such as Google or Bing, to make sure your child can search safely.

Consider using filtering and blocking software. Some parents find these tools to be useful to help protect younger children from accessing inappropriate content.

Have older siblings help. Have your older children help teach your younger children how to be responsible and safe online. Let the older ones know that you want them to help you protect their little brothers or sisters online.

Share wisdom. Kids often don't understand the implications of their actions. But we do. So we have to remember to extend our basic parenting wisdom to the digital world. We teach kids to choose their words carefully, play nicely with others, and respect their teachers. Now we have to extend those lessons to a vast, invisible world.

Pass along your values. As a parent, you can translate your values into the digital world and help kids understand the implications of their actions. Oftentimes the same rules that apply in the real world apply online, such as "be nice to others," "don't say mean things," and "think critically about information."

Seek balance. It's hard to know how much freedom to give kids. We want them to explore, enjoy, communicate, and create. We also want to be sure they are protected. If our kids are going to thrive with digital media, we must balance the negative with the positive, privacy with protection. As our children grow, they need more independence and privacy. But parents have to be sure their kids know how to be safe and responsible before letting them loose.

Keep an open mind. We don't see the world the way our kids do. And we don't help our kids when we judge their lives through the lens of a non-digital world. It's important for us to understand that our kids will spend much of their lives in a connected world, where everyone creates and communicates. We need to help them to enjoy it and learn from it.

Common Sense on Online Security

What's the Issue?

Technology makes it very easy for kids to connect and share things with friends and family no matter where they are. But these connections can come with a huge cost if kids aren't careful. Learning to protect personal identity information, creating strong passwords, and being cautious when downloading programs and files are crucial to kids' safety as well as the security of the information stored on their digital devices. Otherwise, kids can expose themselves and their families to digital threats such as computer viruses, data and identity theft, and hacking.

To understand digital safety and security, you'll need to learn perhaps some unfamiliar words: *phishing*, *malware*, *spyware*, *spam*, and yes, even *junk*. These refer to greedy little programs that attach themselves to respectable-looking software – for example, a downloadable game that looks really cool – and then wreak havoc once installed on your computer. Security programs can help block them, but one of the most important defenses against these threats is teaching kids to treat their devices and information as the truly valuable things they are.

Why Does It Matter?

If kids don't protect their personal information, there are many potential risks: damage to the hardware, identity theft, and financial loss. But children may not realize they are putting their information in jeopardy, because the warning signs aren't always obvious. For instance, another child might ask for your child's computer password to play a game, and then access your child's private email account. Or your child might use a file-sharing program that passes along a virus to your computer. Older elementary kids might be asked to provide personal identity information, such as a home phone number, address, date of birth, or your Social Security number, by a thief posing as someone else, all of which opens up the family to the risk of identity theft. Just like in real life, kids online have to know who to trust with information.

common sense says

Help your child master the fine art of password creation. Teach them:

- **Not to use passwords that are easy to guess, such as their nickname or their pet's name.**
- **Not to use any private identity information in their password.** Identity thieves can use this information to pretend to be them.
- **Not to use a word in the dictionary as a password.** Hackers use programs that will try every word in the dictionary to guess passwords.
- **To use combinations of letters, numbers, and symbols.** These are harder to crack than regular words because there are more combinations to try.

Teach your kids to be careful with what they download. Let them know not to download free games or videos to their computer. These programs often come with spyware and viruses that will land the computer in the shop – and them in hot water. In the end, what seemed like free software often comes at a cost.

Let your kids know how to identify and deal with spam. Teach them that spam is Internet junk mail. This mail should not be opened, because if they do, they will just receive more of it. The best strategy is not to open email from addresses they don't recognize.

Common Sense on Talking Safely Online

What's the Issue?

Kids love connecting with others online. Most young people talk online only with their friends and family. But as a parent, you might be concerned that a stranger with bad intent (predator) could contact your child.

Predatory behavior is when people contact your child on the Internet (mostly through instant messaging, chat rooms, or social networking sites) and attempt to “groom” your child for a relationship. These people try to win children’s trust by hiding their true identities. They may try to get kids into creepy or dangerous situations by pretending to have similar interests, giving them compliments, and letting them talk about anything they want. They typically tell children to keep the friendship secret, and they may even threaten kids if they tell anybody. As the relationship develops, the predator may send pictures, ask a child to send them pictures, and then ask to meet face to face.

Why Does It Matter?

Teaching your child to be alert about how predators groom their targets is crucial to keeping your child safe. With very small kids, it is best if you are present when they are online. At this age, you may choose to block your kids from talking online, or create strict rules for them to follow about who they can talk to. For older elementary school children, you may choose to give them more freedom after first discussing how to stay safe online.

common sense says

Discuss responsible online behavior. Establish rules for appropriate instant messaging and chatting online, and explain that you’re enforcing those rules because you care about their safety. You may want to involve an older sibling who can model good online behavior and can stay involved in their younger siblings’ online lives.

Establish rules for who’s okay to talk to. Online talk should generally be with people your children know, like family and friends.

Set boundaries for what topics are okay to discuss. Kids shouldn’t answer questions online that make them feel uncomfortable. They also shouldn’t talk about adult topics with strangers.

Make sure your child feels safe telling a trusted adult. If something creepy or inappropriate happens online, kids need to know they won’t get in trouble if they tell an adult they trust. Also, avoid banning them from the computer. Kids are less likely to tell parents when they experience a problem on the computer if they think as a result they won’t be allowed to use it.

Remind your kids not to give strangers private information. Kids should never give out their name, address, school, phone number, email, pictures, or anything that could identify who they are.

Block, ignore, or leave. Most kids know to brush off unwanted contact. Encourage this behavior.

Look for warning signs. Does your child seem withdrawn, emotionally distant, spend endless hours online, or seem to be hiding something? The kids who get sucked into inappropriate online relationships often show warning signs. They might be hiding an online relationship they don’t want you to know about. If you think this might be happening, ask your child about it!