

# **Maryland School Mental Health Alliance\***

## ***Internet Safety in Children and Adolescents Information for Parents/Families***

### **Some facts and information to know**

Children are increasingly using the internet in their homes, schools, libraries, and communities. Estimates show that in May 1997, nearly 10 million children were online either at home, at school, or in the community. In 1998, for the 50 million children now in U.S. elementary and secondary schools, 27% of classrooms have internet access and 78% of schools have internet access in the building.

Although the internet can be an excellent resource for children and adolescents; it can also pose hazards to your children. Some areas of the internet may provide your child with information that is hateful, is violent, or contains other types of material that parents might consider to be inappropriate for their children. You may find such material in chat rooms, websites, newsgroups, online services, email, and instant messenger.

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires websites to explain their privacy policies on their site and get parental consent before collecting or using a child's personal information (e.g., name, address, phone number, social security number). This law also prohibits a site from requiring a child to provide more personal information than necessary to play a game or enter a contest. Although this law exists, it does not entirely protect our children from harmful information/materials that can be found on the internet...the rest is up to you and your child!

### **Why do we care?**

Children can greatly benefit from being online; however, they can also be the targets of crime, exploitation, and harassment in this as in any other environment. Children are continuously learning and they are often times trusting, curious, and anxious to explore something that is new and exciting to them. By taking an active role in your child's internet activities and providing the parental supervision that they need, you will be ensuring that he/she can benefit from the wealth of valuable information that the Internet has to offer, while lessening their chance of being exposed to any potential dangers.

- There are risks to using the internet. Some of these risks are:
  - *Exposure to inappropriate material* – this material can be sexual, hateful, or violent in nature or that encourages activities that are dangerous or illegal.
  - *Physical Molestation* – a child may provide information or arrange an encounter that could risk his/her safety or the safety of other family members and friends.
  - *Harassment and Bullying* – a child may encounter messages via chat, e-mail, or their cell phones that are aggressive, demeaning, or harassing.
  - *Viruses and hackers* – a child could download a file containing a virus that could damage the computer or increase the risk of a “hacker” gaining remote access to the computer which may jeopardize the family's privacy and safety.
  - *Legal and Financial* – a child could do something that has a negative or financial consequence such as giving out a parent's financial information or purchasing an item without parental consent.

*\*\*\*Although there are risks and crimes being committed online, it should not be a reason to avoid using these services. A good strategy would be to instruct children about both the benefits and dangers of the internet and help them to be “street smart.”\*\*\**

### **What can we do about it?**

*-Prevention strategies to use during and before internet use:*

- Monitor your child’s internet use! Supervise them!
- Keep the computer in a common area where you can watch and monitor your child. Do not allow the computer to be accessed in individual bedrooms.
- Set rules/expectations for your child and his/her internet use. Sign a contract with your child so that your child is aware of the seriousness of the issue. The following contract was suggested by SafeKids.com, an online resource for child internet safety (see link in resource section):
  - I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parents’ contact information, or location of my school without my parent’s permission.
  - I will tell my parents right away if I come across information that makes me feel uncomfortable.
  - I will never agree to get together with someone I “meet” online or send him/her my picture or anything else without first checking with my parents.
  - I will not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel uncomfortable.
  - I will talk with my parents so that we can set up rules for going online. We will decide upon the time of day that I can be online and appropriate areas for me to visit.
  - I will not give my Internet password to *anyone* other than my parents.
  - I will check with my parents before downloading or installing software or doing anything that could possibly hurt our computer or jeopardize my family’s privacy.
  - I will be a good online citizen and not do anything that hurts other people or is against the law.
  - I will help my parents understand how to have fun and learn things online and teach them things about the Internet, computers, and other technology.
- Help your child to create a user name and password that is unique to your child and that protects his/her real identity.
- Become computer literate and learn how to block objectionable material. Many Internet service providers (ISP) may provide parental-control options to block certain materials from coming in to your child’s computer. You may want to also look into these options if you are unable or unwilling to buy Parental-control software. Parental-control software allows you to block your child’s access to certain sites based on a “bad site” list that your ISP creates.
- Share an email account with your child so you can monitor messages.
- Bookmark your child’s favorite sites for easy access.
- Spend time online together to teach your child appropriate online behavior.
- Forbid your child from entering private chat rooms; block them with safety features provided by your ISP or with Parental-control software.
- Monitor your credit card and phone bills for unfamiliar account charges.
- Find out what online protection is offered by your child’s school, after-school center, friends’ homes, library, or any place where he/she could use a computer without your supervision.

*-Strategies to use if your child reports something disturbing to you or you find your child viewing something disturbing on the internet:*

- Stay calm. Children are tough, even when it comes to exposure to images that you may find disturbing. Try not to launch into crisis mode because they may get scared and they may never tell you if it happens again. Instead stay calm and talk to your child about what happened and what you and your child can do about it. Please

remember that how you respond will determine whether they confide in you the next time they encounter a problem and how they learn to deal with problems on their own.

- Praise your child for showing you or telling you about what they have seen on the internet. Say something like, “I’m really glad you showed me.”
- Explain that some sites are for adults, not kids. And remind them that they can always talk to you if they see anything disturbing again.
- Take your child seriously if he/she reports an uncomfortable online exchange.
- Forward copies of obscene or threatening messages you or your child receives to your Internet service provider.
- Call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at (800) 843-5678 or report it via their website at [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com) if you are aware of the transmission, use, or viewing of child pornography online.

### **Key Resources/Links**

1. Safekids.com offers an article on Child Safety on the Information Highway by Lawrence J. Magid (2003). He discusses benefits, risks, how parents can reduce risks, and guidelines for parents: [http://www.safekids.com/child\\_safety.htm](http://www.safekids.com/child_safety.htm)
2. Safekids.com offers 10 rules for children for online safety: <http://www.safekids.com/kidsrules.htm>
3. Kidshealth.org offers an article on internet safety by Steve Dowshen (2005). He discusses internet safety laws, online tools for parents to protect their child(ren), ways for parents to get involved in their child(ren)’s internet activities, chat room caution, and warning signs for parents that their child(ren) may be a victim: [http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/net\\_safety.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/net_safety.html)
4. Childdevelopmentinfo.com offers an article on helping kids use the internet safely. More specifically this article focuses on preventing and dealing with exposure to porn on the internet: [http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/health\\_safety/web\\_safety\\_for\\_kids\\_teens.shtml](http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/health_safety/web_safety_for_kids_teens.shtml)
5. Childrenspartnership.org presents a Parents Guide to the Information Superhighway by Wendy Lazarus and Laurie Lipper (1998). This guide offers rules and tools for families to use such as the ABC’s for Parents for internet safety, how to get started, getting involved, resources for further information on internet safety, and parent stories: <http://www.childrenspartnership.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentFileID=1048>
6. NetSmartz is an interactive, educational resource for children ages 5-17, parents, guardians, educators, and law enforcement that uses age-appropriate, 3-D activities to teach children how to stay safe on the Internet. The goal of NetSmartz is to extend the safety awareness of children to prevent victimization and increase self-confidence whenever they go online: <http://www.netsmartz.org/>

*\*Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*