

What Kids Do Online



How do your children use the internet? Here's what you should know about six common activities kids do online.

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As the first generation of Internet parents, we're at the bottom of a learning curve that seems to grow steeper with each new application and digital device. It's tempting to try to keep our kids away from the computer. After all, what we don't know could hurt them. But the Internet offers many benefits, educational as well as social.

We can help our children take advantage of the best the Internet has to offer by showing them how to make smart decisions both online and off. To do that, we must keep pace with technology. The best way is to step into our children's online world. Here are six key ways kids use the Internet and what you should know about each one.

1. Learning Online

The Internet is often the first (and only) stop for students who have a project to research or a question they want answered. Children as young as kindergarten age may use the Internet to do simple web searches or to find a book in the school library's online catalog.

As students advance through the grades, school assignments may include emailing book authors or experts in subjects they're studying. They'll be expected to research topics and write reports using online resources, including text, images, and videos.

Your child's school should teach students to avoid plagiarism as well as how to distinguish between good information and bad. You can reinforce these lessons at home.

Use child-safe search engines, for example. And focus on results from trusted resources, such as the websites of established organizations and well-known newspapers and magazines. Show your child how to put her findings into her own words and to cite the sources she uses.

2. Visiting Virtual Worlds

Children of all ages are drawn to virtual worlds where they can customize and control their own characters (called "avatars"), play games, interact with other players, enter contests, and shop using virtual money. Virtual worlds are so popular with kids that there are 200 such sites already live or being planned, according to media company Virtual Worlds Management. Some of these have strong educational components, challenging players with learning games and encouraging social and civic

responsibility. Others focus more heavily on consumer opportunities, encouraging users to win or earn money to buy virtual items for their avatars.

Ask your child for a tour of her favorite virtual worlds. Check out the privacy features and parental controls. Some sites allow users to chat but block certain information, such as email addresses or telephone numbers. Others allow users to interact only through prewritten phrases. Steer your child toward virtual worlds that promote values similar to your own.

3. Social Networking

Social networking sites are the online equivalent of hanging out with friends. They allow users to stay in touch through instant messaging, posting public messages to one another's profiles, sharing photos and videos, playing online games, sending virtual gifts, and much more. Privacy settings allow users to restrict who can view their profiles.

Some social networking sites cater to younger children, though the most popular, Facebook and MySpace, require users to be 13 or older. However, neither site has a way to verify the ages of users and preteens might open accounts by misstating their age.

The best way to learn about social networking is to create your own profile and play with the different applications. If your child has an account, add him to your list of friends so you can view one another's profiles and see who else is on your child's list of friends.

These lists can easily grow into the hundreds as users give access to friends of friends. A good rule of thumb is that only people your child has met in person should have access to her social networking profile.

4. Staying in Touch With Friends

Once children reach their preteen and teenage years, texting and instant messaging through computers, cell phones, and other mobile devices become their preferred means of communication. And they're not limited to the written word. Kids use camera-equipped cell phones, digital cameras, and webcams to send images of themselves to friends. While this can be a fun and creative way to share their lives, it's important to remind your child that he'll lose control of his message or image as soon as he sends it out. Many have learned this the hard way when a text or picture they meant for only one friend to see appeared on the cell phones and computer screens of all their classmates.

5. Posting and Viewing Videos

Video-sharing sites are incredibly popular with kids. Children log on to see the funny homemade video the other kids are talking about; to watch their favorite soccer player score a winning goal; even to learn how to tie a slip knot. With a free account, users can also create and post their own videos and give and receive feedback.

With access to millions of videos comes the risk that your child will stumble upon something disturbing or inappropriate. The video-sharing site YouTube has a policy against sexually explicit content and hate speech, but it relies on users to flag content as objectionable. Sit down with your child when she logs onto video-sharing sites so you can guide her choices. Tell her that if you're not with her and she sees something upsetting, she should get you. Reassure her that you won't be angry and you won't punish her. But it's important that you know what she sees so you can figure out together what to do about it.

6. Playing Games

Certain game consoles, such as Xbox Live, allow players to interact online through text messaging or voice chat using a headset. If your child plays online games, set a rule that he play only with people he

knows in person. And make sure he knows that if he sees anything that makes him feel uncomfortable, he should stop playing and tell you immediately.

As your child grows and digital technology evolves, keep the lines of communication open. Show that you're interested in her online life. But don't worry if you're always a few steps behind. Because as a parent your job isn't to hold your child's hand every step of the way. It's to prepare her to one day go out into the world without you. Both online and off.