

MEDIA SAFETY

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS



From the Office of
Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton
New York

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Now more than ever, our children have easy access to the best and latest products technology has to offer. They can easily entertain themselves by surfing the internet, playing video games, and watching television. These activities may be educational, but some may be age-inappropriate, offensive, or even dangerous. This brochure contains information on how you can ensure a fun and safe media environment for your children at home.



Thank you to **Cablevision's Power to Learn** for the use of their Internet & Media Smarts program in the creation of these materials. For more information about **Power to Learn** or to bring Internet & Media Smarts to your school, visit www.powertolearn.com, e-mail info@powertolearn.com or call (516) 803-2727. In addition, **Common Sense Media**, a leading children and media organization, recently released a guide to help you keep your kids safe online. Other leading technology and media companies have also stepped up to provide new tools to help you keep up with video games and TV.



THE INTERNET

Teens spend an estimated 2 hours a day on the Internet. Most parents don't know what their kids are doing online during these hours. The Internet doesn't have to be off-limits, but there are things parents can do to keep their kids safe. As technology evolves, it is important to talk to your children about what they do on the Internet. Below are some websites that may be helpful to you.

Common Sense Media's guide, "**Keeping Your Kids Internet Safe and Smart,**" is available at www.commonsense.com in the section on resources for parents. This guide describes challenges faced by parents online and survival tips for both kids and parents. It also guides you through different parts of the Internet – such as **instant messaging, blogging,** and **social networking sites** like myspace.com – so you know what is available to your child online, and how you can keep your child safe from inappropriate material and contacts.

Many kids discuss information such as friends' last names, post pictures of themselves, and give out their cell phone numbers without realizing that this is personal information. It is important for families to discuss what information should not be posted online. There are sample rules as well as software that can block your kids from posting this information in the **Internet Smarts** section of www.powertolearn.com.

You can find additional information about Internet safety at other high-quality websites, including www.internetchildsafety.net, www.kids.getnetwise.org, www.netsmartz.org, and www.safekids.com.

Ten Tips to Make Sure Your Family is Internet Smart:

1. Know what your kids are doing. Ask your children to show you what they do online and with digital media – even if they don't show you everything, they will know you are taking an interest.

2. Internet access is a privilege, not a right. Establish rules (and consequences) that are appropriate for your family – when your children can go online, how much time they can spend online, specific types of sites they may not visit, details of what information they may, or may not, give out online, and expectations concerning responsible use of technologies. Your family guidelines can also include a plan for your children to follow in case they are contacted by a person on the Internet who makes them feel uncomfortable. One way to clarify your family's Internet use plan is to draw up a pledge or contract with your child. An example of such a contract can be found at www.webwisekids.org.

3. MySpace. Friendster. Facebook. Bebo. MyYearbook. If you are unfamiliar with these social networking sites, find a tech-savvy friend to help you learn about them. There's a good chance your tween or teen has a profile, and for their safety, you should familiarize yourself with how these sites work. In addition, know your child's screen names and passwords for social networking sites, instant message programs, and other methods of online communication. You can learn more about social networking at sites like www.commonsense.com and www.wiredsafety.org.

4. Communication. Encourage your children to come to you if they are approached by a stranger online or come across something inappropriate. Make it a part of your family rules.

5. Keeping personal information private. No matter how smart your child is, don't assume that he or she knows not to disclose personal information. What may seem obvious to you may not be obvious to your child. Set family rules about disclosing personal information on line such as: Name, address, school, work, friends, pictures, usernames or passwords.

6. More than just the computer. Communication in cyberspace occurs beyond the computer – on cell phones, PDAs, and even game consoles. Know about the different digital media that your child is using and apply safety rules to all of them.

7. Information Permanence. The Internet is forever. Kids should understand that what you post online can come back to haunt you. You are not anonymous online. Everything you write in e-mail, on a blog, in an IM, or even a text message on a cell phone is stored somewhere, even if you delete it. As parents, you should be aware that some companies and colleges have been known to conduct background checks on the Internet.

8. Digital Literacy. Encourage your children to be smart consumers of media and question everything online. No one monitors the Internet. Anyone in the world can post anything – fact or fiction.

9. Be a Fair User of information. Discuss with your children the importance of appropriate use of information. If they use something they find online for a class project, cite the source – otherwise it is PLAGIARISM. Discuss with them the importance of downloading music, videos, and other media LEGALLY.

10. Use Internet protection. Decide what software and protection devices are appropriate for you and your family - a firewall, virus protection, secure passwords, etc. Be wary of advertisements for “free software.” Scan your attachments first. Remember, while technology can help protect kids in cyberspace, nothing takes the place of open communication and understanding of what they are doing.

TALK to your children about what they’ve done on the Internet today. A daily dialogue is the best way of breaking the ice and letting your kids know that you care.

The Internet and Your Child's School

More and more, schools are using the Internet as an education tool. Computers with Internet access may be available in your child's classroom or in the school library. Schools work hard to ensure that children use the Internet safely and appropriately, and welcome parental input and support to meet that goal. Feel free to ask your child's school for information about its Acceptable Use Policy, and find out how that policy is shared with administrators, teachers, and children.



VIDEO GAMES

To make sure that games you buy are appropriate for your child, be sure to check each game's **rating**. The Entertainment Software Rating Board's (ESRB) rating for each game is printed on the box. There are six ratings.

EC = Early Childhood (3 and up)

E = Everyone (6 and up)

E10+ = Everyone (10 and up)

T = Teen (13 and up)

M = Mature (17 and up)

AO = Adults Only (18 and up)

Games that have particular content are labeled (e.g., **Violence; Blood**). To learn more, see www.esrb.org or write to ESRB at 317 Madison Avenue, 22nd Fl., New York, NY 10017.

Industry ratings provide important information about games, but they tell only part of the story. Research at Harvard University shows that even **Teen-rated** games contain high levels of violence: 90 percent reward players for injuring or killing characters.

The same research shows that most **Mature-rated** games (81 percent of them) include content that is not labeled. For this reason you may also want

to check out **independent ratings** of video games by **Common Sense Media** (www.commonsensemedia.org) and by the **National Institute of Media and the Family** (www.mediafamily.org).

Even when you are careful about what games you buy, you cannot completely control what games come into your home. One of your child's friends might bring over an inappropriate game, or your child could rent one. You may want to check the games yourself and, when possible, monitor your child's gaming. Most game consoles come with a set of **parental controls**. These controls allow you to create a password and use the console settings to select which kinds of games your child can play. You may also be able to control when games can be played (e.g., no games after 9 PM), and who your child interacts with while playing networked games. The ESRB website has a useful page for parents that includes links to information on the parental control systems for **Xbox, Nintendo Wii, and Sony's PlayStation 3 and PSP** (www.esrb.org/about/resources.jsp).

Video Games and the Internet

The Internet is also being used to enhance the violent nature of the video games your children play. Children can download unofficial game modifications, also known as "mods," that add more violence or adult content (including pornography) to the games they are playing. Information on preventing this can also be found in the Internet Smarts section of www.powertolearn.com.

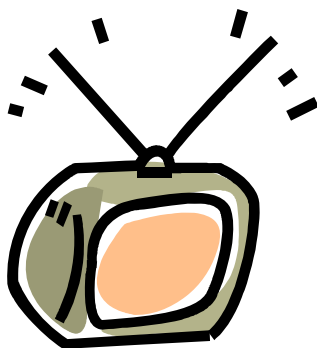
10 Tips for parents with kids who play video games:

- 1. TALK to your children about what games they've played today.**
Asking questions is a great way of opening a dialogue with your children and letting them know that you care.
- 2. Know the ESRB rating system** (www.esrb.org). Familiarity with the different ratings will help you to make sure that the content of a game is appropriate for your child.
- 3. Establish rules and report inappropriate behavior.** Playing video games is a privilege, not a right, for your children. Establish family rules

and define clear consequences. Learn how to handle cyberbullying, abusive language, or harassment in an online video or computer game **before** your children have a problem.

4. **Play the games with your children.** Playing along with your children will help to ensure that you know what they are doing and what they are seeing. It will also expose you to the lingo of the gaming world.
5. **Put the game console in a common room.** You should be able to see what your kids are doing while gaming, just like you would monitor their Internet use on a computer. Try to watch your children when they play. There is no better way to keep your children safe than to know what they are doing. Watching your children play will also let them know that you are taking an interest.
6. **Read independent game reviews.** Many games with a “Teen” rating have a high percentage of violence. Check independent reviews, such as those at Common Sense Media (www.common sense media.org) to make sure the games your children play are consistent with your values.
7. **Make sure your teens are familiar with codes of conduct.** Gaming systems and online websites often post codes of conduct and the consequences for misuse, including being banned from further play.
8. **Remember there might be more than meets the eye to some video games.** Video game modifications (mods) can add graphic content to a game through a download or Internet instructions. Make sure your kids clear any mods with you.
9. **Networked games.** If your child plays any game that is networked (e.g., Halo 2 for Xbox 360, World of Warcraft, or Runescape) you need to know some additional information:
 - a. **Keep personal information private.** Set family rules about disclosing personal information such as: name, address, phone number, or even which school they attend. As parents, you should know that “Griefers” (game bullies) and others online could use this personal information to harass or stalk a child.
 - b. **Pick appropriate screen names (“tags”).** You don’t want your children to disclose personal information or attract unwanted attention with a screen name.

- c. **Your children need to know that they are not anonymous.** Things they write in a chat, instant message, or post while gaming are stored permanently. Make sure they are aware that what they say and do can be traced back to them, so remind them to “play nice.”
 - d. **The digital world can be permanent.** Communications sent during networked video game play are similar to information posted on the Internet. Make sure your children know that information shared while gaming exists online even when the game is over.
 - e. **Keep an open dialog if a problem arises.** Let your children know that if someone harasses them or asks for their personal information online, it’s not your children’s fault. Let them know that they should come to you if they’re ever approached in a way that makes them uncomfortable.
 - f. **Encourage your child to play with their friends rather than random gamers.** Many games, especially the newer ones, allow you to create your own multi-player sessions. This way, children play with their friends and eliminate griefers.
 - g. **Ignore griefers and they will go away.** Most will get bored and leave you alone if you ignore them. Never grief back or react. Griefers are looking for reactions and you should never encourage them. Also, report griefers to the game company. Many games have feedback mechanisms.
 - h. **Change game options and play games with rules that limit bad behavior.** Check your game system’s manual (usually on the manufacturer’s web site) for more information on restricting access to games with Teen, Mature, or Adult ratings; access to online chats; using voice masking; muting or blocking messages from obnoxious gamers or cyberbullies; and other safety features.
 - i. **Use Internet protection** such as a firewall, virus protection, secure passwords, etc. on the router or cable modem used for network access. Often your Internet Service Provider includes these for free with your service.
10. **Feel empowered.** As a parent, you may feel the pressure to keep up with our ever-changing digital and electronic world. But remember, different families will make different choices. Feel empowered to use the tools in this guide and elsewhere to make the right decisions for your family.



TELEVISION

Television programs may pose a challenge to monitor as they are streamed constantly and are more accessible to the general public. Ratings are a good starting point in making sure your children are watching appropriate programs. They are shown at the beginning of each program and can be found in publications such as TV Guide. There are seven ratings:

Y = All Children (2 and up)

Y7 = Older Children (7 and up)

Y7FV = Older Children, Fantasy Violence (7 and up)

G = General Audience

PG = Parental Guidance Suggested

14 = Parents Strongly Cautioned (15 and up)

MA = Mature Audience Only (18 and up)

Shows that have particular content are labeled. When relevant, these content labels appear alongside the rating. They are:

S = Sexual Situations L = Coarse Language

FV = Fantasy Violence V = Violence D = Suggestive Dialogue

To learn more, see www.tvguidelines.org or call (202) 879-9364.

Parental controls may be used when you are busy or out of the house. The television industry has created a website, www.theTVboss.org, that summarizes the TV ratings and shows how to block programs with cable television, satellite television, and the V-Chip.

If you have cable, you can use your cable box to create a password to **block channels** or even specific programs based on TV and movie ratings. To learn more, see www.controlyourtv.org or call your cable company. In addition, your cable company may offer a Family Package with channels appropriate for kids.

If you bought your TV after July 1999, it probably contains a **V-Chip**, which allows you to block programs based on TV ratings. To learn more, see www.v-chip.org or www.tvguidelines.org/faqs.asp, look through your TV manual, or call your TV's manufacturer. **If you have TiVo**, you can create a password and use **TiVo KidZone** to control what programs your child can view based on both independent and industry ratings, as well as your own preferences. To learn more, see www.tivo.com/kidzone or call (877) 367-8486.

Taking Charge of Your TV – 3 Steps to Critical Viewing for Parents and Children:

1. CHOICE

Establish rules that are appropriate for your family. Decide how much time can be spent watching TV and what shows are appropriate. Use the TV ratings to help determine what is appropriate for your children. All TV programming except news, sports, and some MPAA rated movies have a rating that appears in listings and in the upper left corner of the screen at the beginning of each program.

In addition to deciding which shows are not suitable for your children, learn more about children's television shows. The FCC website for parents (www.fcc.gov/parents/) has information on how to find children's programming on the air in your area.

2. CONTROL

Learn about available Parental Controls through your cable provider. There are 5 levels of control that your cable box and remote provide that you can activate individually or in combination. You can:

- Block unwanted channels
- Block individual show titles
- Block show titles based on the TV rating
- Restrict viewing by time period
- Create a “line-up” of acceptable shows

In addition, all TV’s 13” or larger manufactured after January 2000 contain a **V-Chip** which works in conjunction with the TV ratings system to limit access to inappropriate content in your household. Follow the instructions in your TV’s manual.

3. EDUCATION

Ultimately, it is important to discuss with your children what they see on TV and in all media. Here are the 3 important topics to discuss with your children:

TV programs are made to send certain messages. Help your children to understand that most TV shows are scripted. Even if a TV show seems real, its contents have been altered for viewers.

People interpret what they see on TV in different ways. Depending on age, gender, and life experiences, children will get a wide variety of messages from a television program. Watch TV with them and discuss important issues such as how conflicts are resolved or how people are stereotyped. Your children may not be seeing what you are seeing. Each of us brings a different viewpoint and takes away a different meaning. Ask your children what they saw and heard. Check for comprehension and correct their misconceptions.

Television has an underlying economic purpose. Most television programs are supported by paid advertising. Explain to children that advertisers want TV viewers to buy their products. Ask children to think about why certain commercials often appear during certain programs (e.g, toy ads during cartoons). Also, discuss how the commercials make products look great, perhaps even better than they might in real life. Discuss how the use of camera angles, music, lighting, special effects, narration, editing, and more make products look incredible.