

How to Stay Involved in Your Child's Life Online

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Our kids are living most of their lives on the Internet—92% of teens go online daily and 24% report they are online “almost constantly.” There’s no denying our kid’s involvement in the information superhighway. Kids are on numerous social media platforms, socializing away from your watchful eye and in a virtual reality where “privacy” is a moving target. Parenting in the digital age can be difficult, to say the least.

How can you stay involved in your child’s online life without infringing on their privacy? Here are tips for navigating the Internet with kids.

1. Set Smart Internet Rules

Though your child can likely navigate a touch screen better than you can, this doesn’t equate to Internet street smarts. Kids are impulsive and often don’t understand the results of their digital immersion. Set boundaries for their Internet use and establish clear rules for acceptable online behavior.

Depending on the age of your child, you may want your rules to cover everything from banning anonymous actions, setting social media accounts to private, prohibiting posting sensitive personal information, avoiding interaction with strangers, and letting you know immediately about any online harassment or cyber bullying.

2. Stress the Internet’s Permanence

Children are not equipped with the emotional intelligence to know that the things they do online have lasting consequences. It doesn’t matter if it’s a one-second Snapchat or a 140-character Tweet, nothing is temporary on the Internet. Talk with your kids to make sure they understand that the things they put online are permanent.

They are building their online reputation now, and the photos and statements they post today, which may seem silly and harmless, have long-term staying power. Even if something gets “deleted,” screenshots and cache searches can ensure it’s never forgotten. Employers will look at their Internet footprint, as will college admission officials and future love interests.

3. Install Parental Controls

The World Wide Web is lurking with nasty dangers—including inappropriate websites, cyber bullying, and pornographic content. What's even worse is that 71% of kids are hiding their online activity from their parents. Investing in [Internet accountability and filtering services](#) will prevent your child from accessing questionable material. These services can monitor all your devices, rate websites, record search terms, block content, and send you Internet usage reports.

4. “Friend” Your Child Carefully

It's not always best to be friends with your child on Facebook or to follow them on Twitter. Psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair and author of “The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age” says whether or not you are friends with your child on social media depends on their “age, social and emotional maturity, and street savvy about online life.” She recommends checking your kid's social media accounts just as you would casually peek in at a gathering your kid is hosting at your house: don't be wedged on the couch between their friends, but don't give them free rein either.

5. Know Where They Are

Maybe you're not one of your kid's Snapchat followers, but Internet security is still your parental responsibility. And you better know what social media platforms they're using. Parents must be vigilant about staying on top of social media trends. Even if you haven't heard of social networks like Ask.fm, Tinder, Kik, and Whisper, your children probably have. Make yourself familiar with the trending social platforms, their dangers, and their features.

The Family Online Safety Institute advises parents to access their child's social media pages regularly with total transparency. If you find unsavory material, discuss why it makes you uncomfortable. If you are still paying for your child's smartphone, then make it a standard that your kids must tell you which social networks they use.

6. Ask Questions

You cannot stand on the sidelines in the Digital Era simply because you don't understand it—make yourself an expert for the sake of your children. Begin a conversation around the online habits of your children and their peers. Ask your child to show you, for example, what Instagram is all about. Odds are, they'll pull out their phone and show you the app. Ask what their friends and classmates are doing online and how they are communicating with each other. Ask your kids what they're doing online too, and regularly question if they've seen anything online that has disturbed them and discuss what you can do together to solve any issues.

7. Never Use Social Media to Humiliate

We've all seen the viral posts where a parent posts a video or picture punishing their child for not doing a chore or breaking the rules. The trend has become so popular, it's now got its own term—digi-punishment. Though it may seem effective to call out your kids online, it is never a good idea to publicly shame your child over the Internet. Handle problems away from social media sites. It's a parent's job to discipline their child, but it's also a parent's job to be a security net. Digi-punishment teaches your kids bad online behavior, can damage their self-worth, and can hurt their trust in you.

Modern kids should not be leading a secret life on the Internet. As a parent, you must stay up-to-date on your kids likes, tweets, snaps, grams, and swipes. Maintain an appropriate level of control over their online persona by implementing these tips in your routine.

Sarah Brown is a tech specialist with a love of all topics relating to the Internet of Things. She writes about upcoming technologies, Internet safety and the world of online gaming. Sarah believes that through entertainment, technology and the written word, we can all stay connected to each other and create a safe environment out in the ether.