**KEEP YOUR KIDS SAFE ONLINE**

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I think every mom worries about keeping our kids safe.  While on a daily basis, we might be more worried about physical threats, the reality is that these days keeping our kids safe online is just as important.

It seems like almost every day we hear terrifying stories of cyberbullying, online predators, unsolicited photo sharing, and other awful incidents that remind us how dangerous the internet can be. From the emotional toil caused by cyberbullies to the discovery that someone shared a photo or video without your permission to much worse, we’re all at risk.

As adults, we’re usually able to protect ourselves. We make choices based on our morals, values and life experiences. We can detect when something’s going too far. We understand how to set limits and protect our privacy.

Our kids often cannot.

Children can be drawn in by the internet, and they can have a hard time separating online from real life. So, as parents, we MUST protect our kids by setting rules and guidelines to keep our kids safe on social media.

It’s a serious topic and probably one that makes you squirm a little as a parent, but it’s one we have to address. We often don’t want to have conversations about sexual predators or even cyberbullies—but we simply must be aware of what our kids access online and protect them on social media.

**1. REMEMBER: YOU SET THE RULES**

Remember: we’re the parents, so we set the rules when it comes to social media. While our kids might not *agree* that they’re too young for certain social media platforms (13 is the minimum age for Facebook and many others), their participation is still up to us. And of course they’ll protest and whine when we impose limits on screen time. However, it’s vitally important we talk to our kids about the very real dangers of the internet and that they know we’re in charge of their access and ability to connect with others online.

One thing that can help is to draft a contract with your child that details how they’re allowed to use their phones, computers, and other tools. If you need ideas on how to word the contract or what sorts of things to include, [visit iRules](http://www.irules.co/). This template is free and easy to fill in and customize. You can review it with your child and then you both sign off on it and stick to it!

Set family rules about internet usage. For example, kids must turn in their phones before bedtime or Mom must approve which social media platforms, games and other resources kids can access. If you need help on how to talk to your kids about internet safety, visit [WiredSafety](http://www.wiredsafety.com/) or the [National Crime Prevention Council](http://www.ncpc.org/topics/internet-safety).

**2. UNDERSTAND PRIVACY SETTINGS**

Recently there was a story in the news about someone who hacked a nanny cam and was spying on a family in their own home. Truth be told, that scared the heck out of me!

This is just one reason it’s so important to understand the privacy settings on our devices and our kids’ devices. A big one: check the location settings on your camera and social media. If they’re turned on, your photos may be tagged with a location, telling everyone exactly where you and your children are, as well as when you’re away from your home (a perfect opportunity for a break-in).

We can all benefit from knowing how to set up privacy rules on all social media platforms so we can avoid unwanted attention and spam. Set a policy that your kids should never share personal information without your permission—and always carefully vet the source before you allow it.

**3. FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH EVERY PLATFORM YOUR CHILD IS ON**

So maybe you aren’t really excited to set up a Snapchat, Whisper, or World of Warcraft account and participate along with your kids…but as parents we should have access and be familiar with every platform our kids are on.

The internet is constantly growing and changing. Things that seem harmless, like games, for example, can actually be hangouts for online predators and bullies using a gaming character or “avatar” to connect with your child. Once they build up a relationship with your child through the game, they’re one step away from asking to meet in person.

We must keep in mind that any time we’re connecting with another person online in any capacity, we’re opening ourselves or our kids up to them, too. If it’s someone you trust, you’re safe, but if it’s a stranger, you could be creating a dangerous situation.

It’s a good idea to have an account on your kids’ social media platforms, so you can see what they’re accessing and who they’re connecting with.

What’s your daughter looking at on Tumblr? What kind of comments is your son is making on YouTube or Vine? Kids often feel safe in the anonymity of the internet. They feel they can make comments or say things they wouldn’t dream of saying to someone’s face.

Unfortunately, many of these comments can still be damaging and can even be traced back to the source. Teach your kids about kindness, online etiquette and the importance of never doing or saying anything online you wouldn’t feel comfortable doing in person.

You can use apps like [TeenSafe](http://www.teensafe.com/) to track your kid’s history and monitor their social media use. There are also apps like [Bark](https://www.bark.us/) and [PocketGuardian](https://gopocketguardian.com/) that can alert you to cyberbullying, pornography, and any other alarming items your kids are running into online.

**4. SET TIME LIMITS**

On average, kids [spend over seven hours a day](http://learningworksforkids.com/2015/07/how-much-time-do-kids-spend-with-technology/) on digital media. Yikes! In most cases the internet’s a wonderful tool, but internet use can become addicting and cause your kids to disconnect from the world around them.

Plus, it’s nearly impossible to monitor your kids’ activity on the internet when they’re connected literally all day. Therefore, it’s important we teach our kids that mealtimes, family activities, and school should all be times our kids are offline and not staring at a screen (not a bad idea for mom and dad too!).

Some psychologists and mental health professionals are actually concerned all this screen time might be at the root of ADHD, behavioral outbursts, and other issues. You can find guidelines for offline activities at [ResetYourChildsBrain.com](http://drdunckley.com/reset-your-childs-brain/) if you feel online life is becoming too much of a problem.

Encourage your kiddos to get outside and play! Enjoy fresh air! Don’t feel like every memory must be meticulously snapped, chatted, or live-tweeted. It’s okay to live in the moment.

**5. KEEP ALL SCREENS IN COMMON AREAS**

A simple way to keep a handle on what your kids are doing online is to keep all screens in common areas. That means the laptop is only accessible on the kitchen counter, or that kids can only use the tablet or their phones when you’re around to monitor their access.

If your kid uses a cellphone to contact you and stay in touch, consider an app like [Mobile Guardian](https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/mobile-guardian/id556692434?mt=8&ign-mpt=uo%3D8) or [ParentKit](https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/parentkit-parental-controls/id600618138?mt=8&ign-mpt=uo%3D8). These apps allow you to remotely control your kid’s access to apps and online activities on their phone.

Another option is to forgo the smartphone altogether and simply get your child a regular ol’ cellphone (yes, they still make them). You can stay connected to your kid for emergencies, especially if you don’t have a landline. Many of these simple cellphones be found for under $30 and you can add a limited talk-and-text plan to your family plan for almost nothing.

There are [several phones that offer built-in parental controls](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/cell-phone-parenting/whats-the-best-cell-phone-for-kids), including the ability to make and receive calls only from designated contacts and to receive texts but not send them out. Do your research and find something to cover your kid’s basic needs without providing too much access.

**6. KNOW THE TOOLS AVAILABLE TO YOU**

Our kids are growing up in a time when technology is everywhere and as it quickly advances, our kids are advancing right along with it. Many kids are far more tech savvy than their parents. We might even rely on them to program our phones for us or figure things out.

If you’re a parent who struggles with technology, do your research to really, fully understand what your kids have access to. Know the privacy tools and settings you have available and make a commitment to join every forum and every social media platform your kids are on. It may feel a little funny to have a “mom account” on Pokémon Go, but you’ll understand what your kids are doing and you’ll have a clear handle on what their accessibility and activities look like.

Take a basic computer or social media class if you need to. The good news is many tutorials can be found online for free. Don’t feel like you should bring in technology if you don’t have the time to fully explore and understand it. It’s okay if your child isn’t on every social media platform and doesn’t have access to every game online. *They won’t be missing out, I promise.*

**7. EXPLAIN THE PERMANENCE OF THE INTERNET TO KIDS**

It can be really hard for kids to understand the permanence of online activities. Once something is on the internet, trying to remove it can be as hard as trying to put toothpaste back in the tube. Videos, even “snapchats” and anonymous “whispers” can be screen captured and traced back to the user. If current news stories have taught us anything, it’s that everything you put online can be tracked and can come back to haunt you.

*Teach kids the importance of using kindness online*. I know I’m often surprised how cruel some people can be under the anonymity of the internet. It’s like civility and politeness go right out the window when they’re typing behind a screen. If I’VE been offended as an adult, I can’t even imagine how kids must feel when someone says something cruel online!

Teach your kids how words can hurt and to never say something online you wouldn’t say in person. Keep everything private and know even though goofy pictures, obscene gestures, or other things might seem like no big deal right now, they could be seen later when your son or daughter applies for colleges, scholarships or an internship.

**8. SET THE EXAMPLE**

We should all try to lead by example when it comes to online behavior. I know it’s hard to disconnect, but when we’re always on our phones, our kids will learn that’s normal. They will follow our example. If we want our kids to put down their phones and connect more with real life, we have to do the same.

We’ve set some personal rules for ourselves so we set a good example for our kids. We never use our phones when driving and we always put them away during family mealtimes, especially when our kids are trying to engage in conversation. If our kids’ school has a no cellphone policy, we respect the policy when we’re in the carpool lane or when we walk in to pick up the kids.

Keeping the lines of communication open is so important. If our kids reach a situation they can’t handle online or if someone is making them uncomfortable, we have to keep ourselves open to hearing what they have to say (no matter how much we may cringe internally).

The internet doesn’t have to be a scary place. It can be an amazing tool. It helps us learn new things, explore the world and connect with others. We simply have to be wise about the way we set boundaries with our kids to ensure their online experience a positive one!

These smart social media tips and rules help keep our families safe, no matter what situation they may face online.