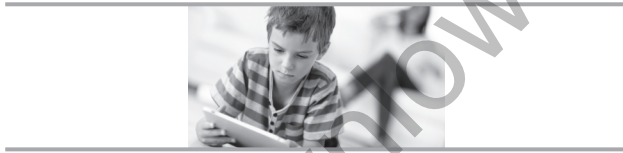


# A Parent's Guide to Online Safety

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## INTRODUCTION



# Technologies Change Quickly – I Can't Keep Up!

Trying to keep up with today's technology can be overwhelming. You probably feel like you'll never understand the technology your child is using, especially when it seems to change every six months. The MySpace of yesterday becomes the Facebook of today. Children and teens love to explore new online gadgets, gimmicks, games and websites, and they often discover new and unexpected uses of these technologies. What's a parent to do?

Take a deep breath. Yes, the technology keeps changing, but the kids themselves stay pretty much the same. Much of what they do is not about the technology they are using. It's about seeking attention, forming and sustaining relationships, taking risks and having fun. Parents have been dealing with these behaviours for centuries – your own parents probably dealt with you behaving this way when you were young.

Look beyond the new gadget, website or technological tool and try to understand the activity your child is engaging in while using the technology. You don't need to panic in the face of new devices, once you realise that the technology is just the latest forum for kids to reach out to others, form identities and push boundaries.

## Some Principles Always Apply

One of our biggest jobs as parents is to set limits according to kids' developmental levels throughout their lives. Childproof latches, for example, stop toddlers from exploring kitchen cabinets. We hold hands with a 5-year-old when crossing the street and we follow our 10-year-old to the park when they ride their bike there for the first time.

Try to view technology in the same way. If your 10-year-old wants to broadcast themselves online from their bedroom, ask yourself if they are ready to face the risks of that sort of public exposure, where anyone watching might try to contact them. As in every situation, when your child is using technology, your goal should be to look at the issues facing your child and set boundaries based on that child's developmental level.

## You Are the Adult

Being a parent in a world with so much new technology is challenging. It's your job to stay vigilant, to understand all the risks and to warn your child effectively about potential dangers, especially when the landscape keeps shifting. However, keep in mind that you have been guiding your child since infancy. You are the adult – the keeper of your family's values – and you already know what to do.

When faced with new and unfamiliar technological influences, it's okay to tell your child that you need to better understand the risks regarding those technologies before they use them. Once you understand the issues, consider

whether or not the innovation is developmentally healthy for your child. In other words, is your child prepared to deal with the issues it presents?

Should your 7-year-old, for example, be allowed to chat with others unsupervised on Club Penguin? The answer to that question should be based on your assessment of whether they are able to discriminate between online friends and others who may treat them badly. Can your 7-year-old make thoughtful decisions before acting and be nice online while playing a game? Are they ready to ignore or properly deal with the hurtful language that is common in online communications? Probably not, but you have to be the final judge of what your own child can handle.

## ChildrenOnline.org: Who We Are

We are Doug Fodeman and Marje Monroe, and we are experts in technology and online safety, counselling and education. Through our website, ChildrenOnline.org, we provide parents and schools with practical, real-life solutions to the issues faced by young people using technology. Since 1997, we have spoken to thousands of students, parents and teachers.

In addition to the many tools and resources we provide on our website, we offer innovative and comprehensive workshops on online safety and education to students, parents, staff and administrators. Our approach, unique in the field of Internet safety, combines a thorough understanding of Internet technologies, child development and counselling.

Each year, we survey two thousand to three thousand students in Year 4 to 12. Students are asked questions about their online activities and attitudes. You will see some of the results of our 2011 survey in the chapters that follow.

Students who took the survey are described as being at various year levels, rather than as being at various ages. There are two reasons for presenting the data in this way. First, the data were collected in schools by year level, and second, we have observed over the years that peer influences in year levels within schools can have a tremendous impact on behaviour. This means

behaviours tend to spread rapidly across a year level regardless of the ages of the students in that year.

Because we sample only at the schools we visit, the sampling doesn't equally represent every socioeconomic level or all ethnic populations. Even so, we are sure you will find it interesting. And while it may be anecdotal, the data coming from public school students is consistent with the data provided by independent school students. We have little reason to believe that our data would vary significantly from that of a broader population of students.

## You Can Do It!

Different families have different rules, but fundamentally, all parents create rules to help their children grow up in healthy and developmentally appropriate ways. There are no rules or boundaries built into the online world, so you must define your child's limits there, too.

You have been a parent for years, imparting values, making difficult decisions and setting boundaries for your child. Take some time to think through how you can translate these skills to the ever-changing sea of technology. Talk to your child, ask questions, research the issues involved and be a presence in your child's online world. Don't assume that just because he *can* use a technology that he *should* use it. Take heart, take a deep breath and make good decisions. You have been doing that for years!