

**PRESS RELEASE FROM THE AMERICAN RED CROSS**

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**INTERNET ETIQUETTE FOR YOUR CHILDREN**

Last week we began our discussing internet safety for parents and their children in our **“BE SAFE”** article. This week we will continue with some basic internet rules that can apply to anyone, but especially to our children.

(NOTE: Much of this information is taken from a great website: <http://wiredkids.org>. If you have computer access check out the “Parenting Online” guide provided there. If not, please read on for further information that is paraphrased below from that article.)

**Don’t talk to or take anything from strangers.** Our children are taught this while they are growing up. The challenge in cyberspace is teaching “stranger danger”. It’s hard to spot the strangers online. The rule of thumb for your children should be that they NEVER converse with ANYONE online unless they know them in person. It does NOT matter how long they have known them online. They are still a “stranger” – period.

**Anyone can be anyone they want to be online.** It’s like going on a blind date. You have no idea of the other person’s real age, real background, real looks, real sex, and most importantly, their real intentions. A twelve year old girl online can be a forty-five year old man in reality. (Note to adults: This has become so much of a problem that many law enforcement agencies and internet watch dogs now PRETEND to be a young person in order to attract, trap and arrest adults who prey on children via the internet.)

**Come straight home after school.** This is another rule we have taught our children from very little on because we know that children can often get into trouble when they don’t follow this rule. The same rule applies to children having the ability to go online, be unmonitored and to stay there without limitations. If you don’t have rules about what sites are appropriate, when the computer can be used and for how long, you are asking for trouble!

**Have a real reason to be online to begin with.** Don’t let the computer replace TV or human interaction. The computer can be another form of entertainment, but it can be that in all of the wrong ways as well. Make a computer available to your children to do research or homework only. If they want to use it for any other reason, sit with them. Their reason will quickly go away.

**It's all about location, location, location.** Make certain the computer resides in an open area that can be monitored at all times. **DO NOT PLACE IT IN A CHILD'S BEDROOM!** If it must be in an area such as a den that isn't used by the family regularly, randomly check on your child at irregular intervals of 1-5 minutes to be sure they stay on task, aren't on sites they shouldn't be and aren't using the computer for the wrong reasons.

Let's also talk about privacy. Your child – if under the age of eighteen – requires privacy only when dressing, undressing or using the bathroom. If they are in their bedroom, your den or on a computer, that privacy goes away. Make certain they understand that you are the parent and that you have the right as well as the obligation to ensure they are safe and not getting into anything they shouldn't be.

This also includes their ability to set up a My Space or other similar account. **DO NOT ALLOW IT.** Check your computer regularly to ensure that they haven't set one up without your permission.

**Don't provoke or get into a fight with anyone.** When you try to provoke someone in cyberspace it's called "*flaming*". It can violate the terms of service for your online service provider and will certainly get a reaction from other people online. These types of fights often happen in chat rooms, discussion groups or someone is *surfing* (randomly looking into other sites) and accidentally becomes involved in an online discussion.

The first line of defense is to not allow your children to go onto any of these spaces – period. However, if they do get onto such a site and get involved in "flaming" they should immediately let you and the *sysop* (system operator and pronounced sis-op) and get offline. They should NEVER get involved in the fight, defend themselves or get into any type of retaliation situation.

**Don't take candy from strangers.** Obviously your child can't accept candy from someone online, but they can accept other things from someone who offers it to them online.

This could come in the form of an innocent *attachment* (this is a file that is sent back with an email or other online response) that can destroy your computer files. Make certain you have a good *anti-virus program* (a program to defend your computer against viruses) or install a *spy ware blocker* (used to keep your confidential information confidential).

It could also come in the form of a personal offer to "listen" to their complaints and problems online or to come over to keep the child company or to meet them somewhere.

**Don't tell people personal stuff about yourself. You never really know who you are talking to when online. Even if you DO know who you are talking to, there could be strangers reading anything that is posted on a My Space or other site without you knowing they are there.**

**DON'T let your children put personal information on the internet – again, PERIOD. It's like putting a personal diary on a billboard and may put them at risk.**

**Define what “personal information” is for your children and be certain they understand it and know that it must be kept confidential. Without even knowing it, your child could give away information that can also be dangerous for them. Examples: “My parents both work a lot of hours and I'm here alone a lot”. Or: “My parents allow me to use their credit cards when I want to buy something”. Or: “I had a big fight with my Mom. I hate her and want to get out of here!” This openly invites someone to break into your home, assault your children, look for and use financial information going across the internet or to make an offer to your child.**

**Teach them not to give away information at websites or to register for contests or promotions unless they have your specific permission. If you allow them to do so, read the website's privacy policy first and know how the site will treat your personal information.**

**Mom and/or Dad must meet and get to know ALL of your friends. First, anyone they converse with via email (and limit it to email only) must go through your main account and be another child who is their friend in every day life. DO NOT talk to your children about what to “should” or “should not” do in this area – GIVE THEM CONCRETE RULES!**

**Respect everyone you interact with at all times. My grandparents had a rule that has haunted/guided me to this day: Never do anything you wouldn't want us to read about on the front page of the newspaper. There is a new twist to this rule that applies to cyberspace: Don't do anything online that you wouldn't do offline.**

**Yes – there are rules of *netiquette* (good manners) that should be used online because we now have a new danger to deal with called *cyber bullying* (online harassment).**

**Believe it or not, your own child can become a *cyber bully* (a person who harasses others) without even intending to do so. There is a lot of anonymity and power in being behind a computer screen as opposed to standing up and being mean to someone in person. In recent years there have been numerous cases of children being bullied, controlled, becoming depressed and even committing suicide because of cyber bullying. This is a dangerous game your children should NEVER be allowed to play.**

**(NOTE: You can learn more about the ways to combat cyber bullying at the following websites: [www. StopCyberbullying.org](http://www.StopCyberbullying.org) or [www. WiredSafety.org](http://www.WiredSafety.org). We will also cover this topic further in a future segment on internet safety so stay tuned!)**

**Join us next week when we will provide you with an “Internet Usage Contract” that every parent should have their child read and sign.**

**This information is sponsored by the Marshall Independent and brought to you by the American Red Cross – Prairie Winds Chapter serving Lincoln, Lyon, Pipestone and Yellow Medicine Counties.**

**If you have any questions or need further information on the topic covered in this article, please contact the local Chapter at 507-532-5565.**