



PARENTING ALL  
AGE GROUPS

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

**The Internet is an amazing invention. It is a useful tool that offers opportunities for learning, finding information, fun games, contacting friends by email, shopping and for chatting to others with similar interests. However, the Internet is an adult environment, with few limits on what is placed on it and where the information may not always be reliable. As such, it can be a dangerous place for children to play.**

**Most children at some stage will have some sort of contact with the Internet. As with other areas of children's lives, parents have a responsibility to provide guidance and to set clear limits. Parents need to understand the impact of the technology and know what their children access on the Internet.**

## About the Internet

The Internet is a massive network of computers from around the world that are all connected by cable and satellite. When you're on the Internet, through your computer you can receive text, images, video and sound from computers anywhere in the world. Being on the Internet is called being on-line; looking on the Internet is called 'surfing the net'.

You can access educational games and programs, research information for school projects and business, shop and communicate with people from all around the world. Just as there is a book or magazine on nearly every subject in your local library, bookshop or newsagent, so is there information on nearly every subject on the Internet.

Controls on, or censorship of, the Internet vary from country to country. For material hosted on Australian servers there is a code of practice that asks Internet Service Providers to remove illegal material. However, this does not cover sites from overseas. Most schools have information technology rules to protect children, but supervision is the most effective policy.

While many parents feel they are being left behind or are out of their depth compared to their children, who seem very confident in using this technology, remembering in the home supervision is the best policy.

**The Internet can have a different effect on children at different ages and stages of development.**

## The main features of the Internet

### Chat lines

Internet chat offers tremendous opportunities to meet and talk with people across borders, time zones and backgrounds. It is a great way to make friends and exchange information. On a chat line one person can talk (by typing words on the computer) to another, or to a group of people. It's like being in a building with hundreds of rooms; you can choose a room by a topic or location and have a discussion with the people in that room. The people who chat are from all around the world and should be classed as strangers. Some chat rooms are monitored, which makes sure decent language and conduct are maintained.

Chat is very popular among young people, particularly teenagers. A lot of the same risks that exist in the real world also exist online, especially in chat rooms. Young people tend to be more vulnerable to these risks.

Most people online are friendly and polite, but some can be unfriendly and rude. A small number are exploitative and predatory.

Sexual predators, posing as teenagers, can lure a child or young person. A grooming 'process' may take place over many months. They can mess with a person's emotions to create a dependency. Some teenagers get into online relationships thinking they are dealing with a predator and think they can outsmart them, or that it is fun to try.

- For children aged five to seven years limit chat room visits to when you are present and keep visits short.
- For children eight to eleven years investigate any chat rooms or online activities they want to explore, and use the phone or other means to check they are legitimate.
- Young teenagers are generally more independent and self-assured so remind them of the need to be careful, and encourage chat rooms that are monitored or moderated.



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## The main features of the Internet *(continued)*

### On-line video

On-line video means that you can view activities in other places as they happen. For example, see what is happening in Times Square in New York or on the NASA site see the space-shuttle activity. On-line video chat is like a chat line, but with pictures and voice as well. A small personal video camera is attached to the computer. These cameras make it possible to see the person you are talking to.

### E-mail (or email)

Email is an electronic form of sending a letter or document to another person.

Messages can be typed, sent to the person's email address and arrive almost immediately on their computer. It is a system that is cheap, quick and very widely used.

### World Wide Web

The World Wide Web (www) is a massive collection of pages of information, pictures and games that can be accessed by any computer that is on-line and typing in a web address. Most pages on the Web contain links, and these links will connect you to more pages or other sources of information or Internet sites. When you are looking around the Web you are 'surfing the Net'.

### Newsgroups

Newsgroups are an electronic bulletin board that is accessed by using a similar screen to the email screen. People join newsgroups of common interest and share ideas and resources on a chosen topic. Some newsgroups are monitored and stick tightly to the topic, whilst others don't and they contain adult conversation that may be used by paedophiles.

### Interactivity

Interactivity is like a two-way conversation with the computer. Users can choose things they want to see just by the click of the mouse (a device that directs and points on the screen). The computer can ask questions of the user and they can reply. The computer 'comes to life' with multimedia (many forms of communication like pictures, music and sound effects). The Internet uses multimedia and interactivity extensively.

**Filtering software can provide some help, but should not be relied on alone—parent supervision is so very important.**

### Filtering software

Software is the name for the programs that you use for your computer.

There are a number of Internet filtering tools that parents can use to control the information that is accessed by children using the Internet.

The three most commonly used varieties are filter, labels and safe zones. The software can filter access to web sites and so protect children from harmful, violent and sexually explicit material and chat lines. However such tools are not foolproof and some 'computer aware' children can still get around these programs.

Filtering software can provide some help, but should not be relied on alone—parent supervision is so very important.

### CD-ROM

A CD-ROM (Compact Disk Read Only Memory) looks just like an audio compact disk (CD). Many CD-ROMs are replacing 'floppy disks' as they store much more information, including video and music.

### Computer games

What might seem harmless entertainment to some can actually be very harmful to preschoolers, yet many parents are 'tricked' into thinking some games and programs are suitable for families by a combination of clever promotion and advertising.

Exposure to violent and sexually explicit computer games and images has been linked to emotional and health problems in children. Yet, the most popular games are those that feature impact violence (karate and supernatural games).



## Common dangers in using the Internet

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The Internet is an adult environment, where there is little or no regulation or control on what can be placed on it. While there are over 3 million perfectly safe children's sites on the net to find useful information, fun computer games and entertaining websites, children can also be exposed to many pitfalls and dangers. Some sites can be found quite easily by accident and may appear superficially harmless and amusing. However there is plenty of material that can be damaging to children and young people's development.

Be aware that:

- much of the information on the Internet is not accurate or reliable
- a person can pretend to be someone they are not. Is the 15-year-old on the chat line really who he says he is?
- a child may provide personal information to strangers or arrange to meet new 'friends' without really knowing who they are
- children have become victims to paedophiles and others who later meet with them and then exploit or abuse them
- email can be used to harass or annoy others
- violent and disturbing images include things like crash scenes and mortuary sites
- some sites provide information on criminal activity such as bomb making and drug abuse
- advertising, with bright colourful images puts pressure to purchase goods on-line
- use of credit cards to purchase goods and services may not always be safe
- it is possible to gamble on-line by providing money via a credit card
- quite innocently children can bring up sites that do not relate to the topic they are looking for, or get sent images or messages that are not suitable.
- the Internet can become addictive.

## Why parents should be concerned

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The Internet is fun, but full of strangers. Opportunities are there for your child to be exploited or abused.

Too much sitting at a computer can be unhealthy and result in repetitive stress injuries, eyestrain, obesity and social isolation.

Research has shown that violence in most forms of screen media such as films, videos, television, computer games and the Internet can have a negative effect on children, particularly young children.

Children exposed to a steady diet of violent media are at risk in three ways:

- learning aggressive behaviour
- becoming desensitised to others being hurt
- becoming fearful of their everyday world.

## Becoming 'hooked'

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Children and young people can become addicted and so absorbed in what cyberspace has to offer that little or no time is left for being with people, or getting enough physical exercise. Often children can become 'hooked' into the fast moving world of computer games and too much exposure can lead to a number of problems—such as poor eating habits, lack of exercise, not mixing with others, poor communication, trouble with school work and difficulty concentrating in class.

Some signs to look out for in your child's behaviour:

- cutting back on the time she is outside, being with friends, playing sports and doing other social activities in order to use the computer
- becoming withdrawn or difficult
- eating meals in front of the computer; staying up late to finish off a game; missing out on school, homework or other responsibilities
- talking only and all the time about games and the computer while losing interest in other hobbies
- copying karate moves and fantasising about computer characters
- becoming upset and irrational when asked to turn the computer off or becoming aggressive or withdrawn.

## What parents can do

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- Learn more about the Internet—become comfortable with the technology (you don't have to become an expert).
- Talk to your child's school about their on-line policy—one that parents can also put into practice at home.
- Select a reliable service provider and discuss children's online safety with them.
- The computer that is on-line should be in a family area, not in a bedroom or behind closed doors.
- Teach your child from a very young age to be a critical viewer, to understand and talk about what he sees and what it means. Help him to understand how advertising works.
- Pay attention to what your child is doing and know your child's 'online name'.
- Keep track of what is going on by checking 'bookmarks' or 'favourites' or the sites your child might be revisiting, for example, 'options', 'preference' or 'history' (via the icons on the menu bar).
- Teach your child to say 'No' to messages and to log out, then save the information for reporting on a site that makes him feel uncomfortable, or disturbs or confuses him.
- Teach your child never to give out his name or the names of friends.
- Ask your child to talk to you before filling in any forms, questionnaires or competitions.
- Encourage your child to only use monitored chat lines designed for his own age group and to be himself when on-line.

- Teach that people in chat rooms are not always who they say they are and what that can lead to.
- If your child or teenager wishes to meet new on-line 'friends' in person, supervise the meeting to make sure that they are who they say they are and that your child is safe from abuse.
- Encourage a careful approach to 'information' found on the Internet. Remember it comes from many sources and not all is reliable.
- Tell your child never to send images of him over the Internet—they may be used for other purposes.
- Encourage your child to use chat groups or newsgroups or send email messages only with your permission and under your supervision.
- Help protect with 'filtering' or 'blocking' software'.
- When your child hurriedly minimises the screen when interrupted it's a sign for you to have a chat.
- Never respond to messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, or threatening. Encourage your child to report such experiences to you and discuss these matters calmly. Forward a copy of any such messages to your service provider and ask for assistance.
- Should you become aware of any child pornography online note the details and report the matter to Crime Stoppers, phone 1800 333 000.
- Don't let your child engage in on-line shopping.
- As the Internet can be addictive always set a time limit.
- Your child may use the Internet in a friend's home, so choose carefully where you allow your child to spend time. Talk with the parent about the use of the Internet in their home.
- Be prepared to make a complaint about Internet content to the Australian Broadcasting Authority.

### ...and about computer games

- Monitor what your child buys or obtains by looking at the classification labels on the cover.
- Keep track of where the software is coming from, for example, the Internet, friends, software pirates.
- Ask to join in and have a go. Ask what games are played most often. Take note of your child's reactions as he plays the game. Does he become aggressive, frightened or upset?
- Together make very clear rules in your home about switch on and off times.

### How much time is okay?

Screen-based media, that is, TV, videos and computers, can be a 'time thief'. Young Media Australia recommends:

- children under two years—very little time
- preschoolers—an hour a day is plenty (of programs made for preschool children). (A strong view held by The Alliance for Childhood is that computers should not play a significant part in preschool children's lives.)
- children five to seven or eight years—an hour a day is plenty
- children over eight years—an hour and a half-hour to two hours a day is plenty.

While there are many entertaining experiences for children to be had on TV, videos and computers, it is important to keep in mind what children need at different ages for their healthy development.

**Children especially need time to build strong bonds with real and caring people, time for active physical play and 'hands-on' activities of all kinds.**

## Reminders

- Reduce the risks for your children by making sensible rules and knowing what your children are doing.
- Learn more about the Internet yourself.
- Teach your children to be selective and explain why it is so important.
- Use blocking software or filters.
- Check regularly the sites that are used.
- Have clear rules about the amount of time spent with screen based media.
- Time with TV and computers needs to be kept in balance with time in the real world with real people.
- If necessary, lodge complaints with ABA.

## Want more information?

ParentLink	<a href="http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au">www.parentlink.act.gov.au</a>	13 34 27
Parentline (9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public holidays)		6287 3833
Australian Broadcasting Authority (for complaints)	<a href="http://www.aba.gov.au">www.aba.gov.au</a>	1800 226 667
Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday)	<a href="http://www.dhcs.act.gov.au">www.dhcs.act.gov.au</a> Gungahlin Tuggeranong	13 34 27 6207 0120 6207 8228
Child and Youth Health (parenting and child health information)	<a href="http://www.cyh.com">www.cyh.com</a>	
Crime Stoppers	<a href="http://www.crimestoppers.com.au">www.crimestoppers.com.au</a>	1800 333 000
Health First	<a href="http://www.healthfirst.net.au">www.healthfirst.net.au</a>	6207 7777
Lifeline	<a href="http://www.lifeline.org.au">www.lifeline.org.au</a>	13 11 14
Young Media Australia (YMA)	<a href="http://www.youngmedia.org.au">www.youngmedia.org.au</a>	1800 700 357

## See other ParentLink guides

- Discipline (0–12 years)
- Discipline (teens)
- Living with teens
- Protect your child from paedophiles
- Television

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