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A Guide for Parents - Children and Computers: The Hidden Dangers

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A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Children and Computers: The Hidden Dangers

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If your child has a home computer or access to someone else's computer, particularly if the computer is connected to a phone line via a modem, this guide is for you. You tell your children not to talk to strangers, watch and direct where they go and who they meet in the "Real World." You need also to be aware of dangers in the electronic world and exercise these same precautions.

Today's "Nintendo" children weaned on video games are quick to adapt to computer use. Society has high hopes for this technically literate generation, but the proliferation of microcomputers and computer literacy also means more and more personal information assets will be stored on computer systems. Along with this wealth of information, the potential for technology abuse will increase dramatically.

With expanding computer technology and the increasing number of people who are computer literate, it is much more likely that children may be victimized or exploited in a computer environment. The Information Super Hiway or Cyberspace -- Bulletin Board System services, commercial online services such as Prodigy, America Online, Compuserve, and the Internet -- allows millions of people around the world to communicate anonymously in a virtually uncontrolled electronic world.

Going online via computer gives children access to information that parents would not allow them to have in other forms. Parents have unknowingly allowed their children to invite criminals into their homes via computer. This can result in the child becoming involved in criminal activities and, all too often, being victimized by persons who parents would never have allowed physically into their home.

The U.S. Congress is attempting to regulate the Internet to control information being offered online. <u>The best solution for you as a parent is to be involved in your child's activity</u>.

Tips for Safe Computing

Parents, please advise children (without alarming them) to observe the following safety rules whenever they are online. Remind them that no matter how safe and/or friendly a bulletin board system or chat line/news group seems (and this includes the major services), potential for danger exists.

CHILDREN:
<u>Do not ever</u> give out personal information about yourself -- particularly real names, addresses, phone numbers, or financial information -- to anyone you meet on computer bulletin boards or chat lines.

<u>Do not respond</u> to anyone who leaves obnoxious, sexual, or menacing E-mail (in computer circles this is known as flaming). Do not become involved in public flirting -- you have no idea who you are dealing with and what access an individual may have to your personal or online account information.

<u>Report all electronic harassment and/or abuse</u> <u>to your parents</u>. Your parents will notify the appropriate Bulletin Board System Operator (BBS Sysop). Most bulletin boards will ask for input to help the system operator better manage the system. Many have a"Chat with SYSOP or "Do you want to leave a E-Mail message for the SYSOP." If they do not give you satisfaction in stopping this abuse, notify the police.

Never set up face to face meetings with anyone met online. If anyone you meet online wants to meet you, tell your parents.

PARENTS:
Notify the police of all attempts by adults to set up meetings with your children. This is by far the most dangerous situation for children and these criminals should be prosecuted when appropriate.

Safeguard all credit cards and telephone card numbers. Pay for all services by money order whenever practical.

Signs of Computer Addiction

As parents you need to be alert for warning signs in your children that can indicate possible computer-related problems. The following are <u>warning signs</u> to watch for with your child and are meant as an alert of a possible problem, not evidence of a problem:
- Withdraws from friends and family and "lives on the computer."
- Loses interest in social activities.
- Uses new (unusual) vocabulary, heavy with computer terms, satanic phrases, or sexual reference, or exhibits sudden interest in related hard rock or satanic-oriented posters, music). Look for related doodling or writing that uses words such as hacking, phreaking (or any words with "ph" replacing "f").
- Lacks interest in self, appearance, and grooming or shows lack of sleep.

Be aware of other potential danger signs:
- Computer and modem running late at night (even when unattended).
- Computer files ending in Gif, jpg, bmp, tif, pcx, ol, gl, fli. These are video or graphic image files and parents need to know what they illustrate. Image files may be pictures of a sexual nature and can be high quality, animated, and may even include sound.
- Names on communication programs which seem satanic or pornographic (rude or vulgar words).
- Obsession with fantasy adventure games (Dungeons & Dragons, Trade Wars, Sexcapade).
- Use of computers to scan or run telephone numbers or credit card numbers.

Protect Your Children

If you are not computer literate, **learn about computers.** Take a course at your local city college or adult education school.

Be involved with your children's use of the computer, and know what they are doing with the computer. Talk to your children about their use of the computer and the concerns you have about on-line communications.

If possible, **keep the computer in a common area** of your home, such as a family room or den, where online activity can be monitored. Virtually every case investigated where children were involved in computer crimes or abuse involved computers located in the child's room, often with locked doors.

You decide if your child has a legitimate need for a modem. If a modem is being used, control the activity. Monitor times and numbers dialed.

Closely monitor your long distance telephone bill for unexplained phone calls.

If your child has left the computer running unattended, **check the screen**. If it is showing a series of changing numbers, the computer may be running a hacking program trying to identify calling card pin numbers or long-distance access numbers.

Advice for Parents of Cyberspace Children

Living in the computer age can provide many exciting opportunities for children. <u>It is important that parents and other concerned adults monitor children's use of this technology.</u> Understanding the risks and being vigilant in preventing problems is the key to successfully utilizing computers in your child's development. <u>Be involved in your child's computer activity.</u>