

Internet Smarts
Keeping Personal Information Private
Parents Guide

Introduction: Internet Anonymity and Its Dangers

You hear it all the time in the media—the Internet is dangerous because of cyberbullies, child predators, and others who want to take advantage of your children. People on the Internet can be anonymous; they can pretend to be anyone they want to be. Kids, even teens, tend to be trusting when they "meet" people online. If someone claims to be a 12-year-old boy, it probably wouldn't cross a child's (or teen's) mind that that person could be a 35-year-old man or woman. —Or perhaps a female classmate.

To be sure, there are dangers online that your children must learn to avoid, for using the Internet is a fact of life in today's world. Although most of the time the Internet is a wonderful place for your children to learn and interact with others, being careful is important. It's your job as a parent is to help your children learn how to handle themselves online, like in their neighborhood or city, so that they will not put themselves in danger.

Please be aware, in addition, that your children may use online anonymity to experiment with language and actions you would not approve of when they communicate online. They may take alternate personalities to make fun of others as a cyberbully. Most online bullying is caused by those your children know—often peers – who sometimes use the personal information your children leave online to bully them.

Remind your children that the cardinal rule when they are online – when gaming, social networking, texting, blogging, etc. - is to not post or give their real name, school, address, telephone number, picture, or any other information that could identify them. Even among friends they know in person (not just online), they should not share passwords or personal feelings they wouldn't want spread through their classroom and beyond. "Oversharing" is the number one issue in trying to keep personal information private and these days hackers and predators have trained themselves to pick up the bread crumb trail of personal information that children unwittingly leave behind. Most importantly, your children should never agree to meet anyone they've met online without your permission, and if you give your permission, you should accompany them to meet the person.

Your number one job is to establish open lines of communication about your children's digital activities. Surveys tell us that most kids are so afraid that their parents' first reaction to any issues is going to be to remove their privileges and cite that as their biggest reason for not discussing problems with their parents. You need to assure them you are going to hear them out first before taking any actions.

Using Power to Learn's Interactive Activity

Because you want your children to focus on the dangers of giving out personal information, the best place to go is right to the source - the Internet. Before you and your children sit down to use the online interactive activity on not giving out private information at http://www.powertolearn.com/internet_smarts/interactive_case_studies/keeping_personal_information_private, you might want to print this guide so you can read through it and follow it step-by-step. If you don't want to print it, make sure you read through all the steps before starting.

The activity itself is an open-ended story about a fifth grade girl who gets involved online with someone she considers a cool, new friend. In the activity your children are asked to consider various endings to the story as they tackle the problem of exactly who this "friend" might be and what might happen in different scenarios.

The idea is not to scare your children, but instead to help them toward understanding what it is safe to do online. Your goal is to get them to realize although the Web is wonderful, they have to be careful there just like they do in their community. They certainly wouldn't walk up to a total stranger on the street and give that person their telephone number or their picture or tell them when and where their next sports event is happening.

Follow These Steps:

First—

Have your children take the online poll, which is at the beginning of the activity. Their answers will be recorded and they will discover how their answers compare to others who took the poll.

Second—

You and your children should read the open-ended story that is presented after the poll. Depending upon their age level, you may want to read it with them.

Third—

The next part of the lesson features five ideas that could happen next in the story. Go over each scenario with your children. Without scaring them, discuss with them possible endings to each scenarios and how they can be safe. The scenarios are:

Scenario One

Gwen's parents go to the mall to see who Tiffany and Jake are. Would they find that Tiffany is really a sixth grader who is a cheerleader, or could Tiffany be someone else? Maybe Tiffany is a 20-year-old woman? Maybe Tiffany is a 13-year-old boy or a 55-year old man who have been pretending to be a sixth grade girl?

Scenario Two

Gwen sneaks out of the house and takes the bus to the mall? She meets Tiffany and Jake, and they all go to the movies. When she comes out of the theater, her father is waiting for her.

Scenario Three

Gwen and her mother go to the mall to meet Tiffany? They wait outside the pizza shop, but no girl in a pink sweater is there. In school on Monday, the kids are all laughing as Gwen comes into the room.

Scenario Four

Gwen sneaks out of the house and takes the bus to the mall? She doesn't see a girl in a pink sweater, but instead a guy, who looks about 17, asks her if she is Gwen and introduces himself as Jake. He asks her to come with him to see Tiffany.

Scenario Five

Gwen dries her tears and tells her mother that even though she will be embarrassed she is willing to have her mother go with her to meet Tiffany. Her mother gives her a hug and tells her to text Tiffany that she will meet her. Gwen tells Tiffany that she has to bring her mother along.

Fourth—

After the scenario section, a number of questions targeting the content are given. Work with your children to help them answer the questions.

Why do you think Gwen's mother is so worried?

She's worried because she wants her daughter to be safe, and she knows that it isn't safe for kids to agree to meet people they've met online unless they have their parents' permission and unless their parents go with them to meet the person.

Why would someone pretend to be someone they aren't?

Some people are just trying to be funny or to embarrass other people. They might think it's neat to act like somebody else. Teenagers might do it to make fun of younger kids like Gwen. The real risk, though, is if someone dangerous arranges a meeting with a kid, and the kid goes because he or she thinks the person is another kid.

Suppose a kid finds an adult online who will listen to him or her. The person is very nice and easy to talk with. Is this person okay to meet?

No, absolutely not! The same rules apply. Kids should tell their parents if they are "talking" with any adults online, and they should never plan to meet them face-to-face without their parents permission and unless their parents are with them.

What things did Gwen do wrong that might put her in danger?

She thought she really knew someone she didn't know. She gave a person she met online personal information about herself. She didn't follow her parents' rule about not interacting online with people she didn't know. She went online late at night. She lied to her mother.

Why didn't Gwen want to talk to her mother or father about Tiffany?

Gwen thought she really knew Tiffany, but she knew her parents wouldn't want her "talking" so much with someone she met online. She probably felt her parents wouldn't understand how important Tiffany was to her.

Why didn't Gwen think it could be dangerous to meet Tiffany?

Gwen trusted Tiffany as a good friend—her best friend. She thought she knew Tiffany very well, even though she didn't.

Fifth—

It's always easier to get children to follow rules when they've had some say in what they are. Talk with your children about their uses of the Internet and discuss with them why rules are necessary. Your children will be much more likely to use the Internet safely and responsibly if they understand why it is important to follow rules for Internet use carefully.

Have your children work with you using the “Rule Maker” and/or the “Internet Use Contracts” to create a set of rules and to provide an agreement for their Internet use. We've included some basic rules and you can add your own. If you and your children like the idea, you can also sign “Internet Use Contracts” that make the safe and appropriate behavior you expect from your kids very clear and explicit. This can be customized to meet the needs of your family.

And don't forget to post the rules where your children can see them! The most important thing to remember is to keep the lines of communication open and to assure your children that if they do encounter a problem online that your first action will not be to remove their digital privileges. The fear that will happen is the foremost reason most children give for not talking to their parents about issues they encounter in the digital world.

Additional Resources

Wired Safety

<http://www.wiredsafety.org/resources/biographies/parry/index.html>

BBC Safety Online Resources

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/onlinesafety/>

Google Safety

<http://www.google.com/familysafety/>

Social Networking : Safety Tips for Tweens and Teens

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/tech/tec14.shtm>

Family Internet Health & Safety

<http://familyinternet.about.com/library/safety/blsafety1.htm>

Child Safety on the Information Highway

<http://www.safekids.com/child-safety-on-the-information-highway/>

GetNetWise

<http://kids.getnetwise.org/tools/index.php>

Family Internet's Safety & Privacy Online

http://familyinternet.about.com/od/computingsafetyprivacy/Computing_Safety_and_Privacy_Online_and_in_the_Home.htm

Surfnet Kids List of Monitored Chats

<http://www.surfnetkids.com/chat.htm>