



Technology Safety for Teens

Cell phones, instant messaging, personal web sites ... the list keeps growing of new hi-tech ways for teenagers to communicate with each other. In many cases teens today are far ahead of their parents on understanding how to use this new technology, leaving them unsupervised and relying on their own (sometimes naïve) discretion as to how to make the most of these new "toys". While the technology itself can be helpful at times and fun to use, parents should set limits and supervise the use of these new innovations. Without parental guidelines, cell phones, instant messaging and personal web sites can become an unhealthy "addiction" for some teens, taking them away from more healthy forms of communication with peers. Even worse, these new forms of communication lend themselves to privacy issues and the possibility of communicating with complete strangers. The following offers suggestions for safe and appropriate use of technology for teens:

Cell Phones

- ♦ Direct voice communication and voice messaging allow teens to communicate with family and friends from just about anywhere - a safety benefit for parents to always be in touch. Some teens are using cell phones exclusively for all communication, rather than ever using their family's home phone. While this may be helpful for some families (keeping their home phone line clear), parents should be aware that this provides anonymity for the caller. If parents are concerned about whom their teenager is receiving calls from, they might want to limit cell phone use to outside the home.
- ♦ Text messaging can be a very convenient way to leave a quick message for someone in a meeting/class. However, there is much room for inappropriate use of text messaging. The number one problem teens face with text messaging is overuse. Because many teens have unlimited text messaging plans, some become "addicted", sending and receiving hundreds of text messages in a given day (interrupting normal activities such as class work, homework and sleep). As with instant messaging and e-mail, teens should also be aware that there is a chance that a text message may be sent from someone other than that identified as the sender.
- ♦ Photo sending ability is a fun way to share any moment with family and friends. In addition to sending photos to friends, many teens use photo sending ability to post photos on personal web sites. For privacy and safety issues, it is important for parents to set limits to the types of photos their teens post on personal web sites.

Instant Messaging

- ♦ Like cell phone text messaging, instant messaging on the computer can become addictive for some teens, interrupting homework and even sleep. As with television and video games, parents should set limits for the amount of time teens spend instant messaging.
- ♦ Spending time with friends in person or on the phone is always a healthier way for teens to communicate with friends. Text messaging can lend itself to online bullying and sarcasm. Teens should be reminded to use the same etiquette and values when communicating online as when communicating in person.
- ♦ Under no circumstances should teens ever communicate with someone they do not know online. As with text messaging, there is no guarantee that the person your teen is communicating with is who they say they are.

Personal Web Sites

Personal web sites, such as "My Space" and "Facebook", have become very popular among teens. Teens use these personal web sites to create their own web pages and communicate with others. Text, audio and images can be posted to these sites and members can send and receive messages from others. Recently these sites have received much media attention due to their attraction of sexual predators. Many parents have no idea their teen even has a personal web site, but anyone who has online access can create a personal website free of charge. Though "My Space" and "Facebook" require teens to be 14 years old, there is no accurate way for them to enforce this requirement. Parents should periodically review their teen's personal web site if he/she has one, and discuss with him/her the following safety guidelines:

- ♦ Never post last name, phone number, address, IM screen name or any other identifying information that would make it easy for a stranger to locate you (ie. name of school, where you hang out, location of extra curricular activities etc.). Many teens use pseudo names for safety reasons.
- ♦ **Be sure to make your website "private", so that only invited friends may view your webpage.** Only invite people who are truly your friends to your web page - not others that you are vaguely acquainted with. A good rule of thumb - if he/she is not someone your parents allow you to get together with outside of school, he/she should not be invited to your webpage. **Remember that people are not always who they say they are!** Online predators often pose as schoolmates or teens from other schools.
- ♦ Don't post embarrassing, inappropriate or sensational information or photos on your webpage. Many teens try to make their web sites sensational to attract more people to visit them. Teens should be reminded not to post anything that they would not want their parents, friends' parents or strangers to see. They should be reminded that even an "invited" friend may share their web page with someone else.
- ♦ Do not post harassment, hate speech or inappropriate content onto your website or that of others and report inappropriate content to the website server or the authorities.

Internet

- ♦ Monitor your teen's Internet usage by placing the family computer in a common area of the house where you can supervise usage. Take time occasionally to review the "recent history" of searched terms and sites visited.
- ♦ Teach your teen not to communicate with strangers online in chat rooms, as they may be frequented by predators.
- ♦ As with personal websites, teens should never give personal information online. Tell them to use a "pseudo name" when registering for online games etc.
- ♦ Do not allow your teen to have login passwords that you cannot access. It is important for you to be able to review what they are doing online.
- ♦ Teach your teen not to download anything without your permission including illegal downloading of music and movies. Not only are there legal ramifications, but many illegal downloads are infested with computer viruses, worms and Trojan Horses which could damage your computer or allow hackers to gain credit card information or other personal information.
- ♦ Unfortunately pornography is readily available on the Internet. Sexually explicit images can appear accidentally while searching innocent topics or be downloaded intentionally. While filtering software can reduce the rates of unwanted exposure, they are not 100% effective.