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Kids and the Internet: Frequently asked questions

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Q. [At what age should I let my children go on the Internet?](#)

A. Children are going online at younger and younger ages—in fact, the fastest growing segment of Internet users is now pre-schoolers. Many kids are using the Internet at school by the time they are 6 years old, so they'll probably want to go online at home around this age as well. Children under 10, however, generally don't have the critical thinking skills to be online alone, so you must be totally involved when kids younger than 10 use the Internet. Sit with them whenever they are online. Make sure they only go to sites you have chosen. Teach them to never share personal information over the Internet. To learn more about what you can do, read [A parent's guide to online safety: Ages and stages](#).

Q. [Should I let my children have their own e-mail accounts?](#)

A. Young children should share a family e-mail address rather than have their own accounts. As they get older and want more independence, you can give them their own address. The mail can still reside in your family inbox, so you can ask about any suspicious-looking messages they may get. Ask your Internet Service Provider (ISP) what options it provides for family e-mail accounts and consider using [e-mail filters](#) to help prevent the delivery of spam, unsolicited messages, and [fraudulent e-mail](#) designed to steal your personal information.

Q. [What house rules should I have for Internet use?](#)

A. Negotiate an online agreement with your kids outlining the rights and obligations of computer use at home. Make sure the agreement clearly sets out:

- Where your kids can go online and what they can do there.
- How much time they can spend on the Internet.
- What to do if anything makes them feel uncomfortable.
- How to protect their personal information.
- How to be safety conscious in interactive environments.
- How to behave ethically and responsibly while online.
- How to use chat rooms, news groups, and instant messaging services.

Your children's input is critical to the success of the agreement. Print it out and keep it by the family computer to remind everyone of the rules. Review it regularly, and update it as your kids get older. To learn more about establishing house rules for Internet use, read [Using family contracts to help protect your kids online](#).

Q. [How old should my child be to use instant messaging \(IM\) services such as MSN Messenger?](#)

A. Children under 13 will need permission from their parents to use MSN Messenger since they also need a Hotmail account to be able to register for instant messaging, also called IM. (If you are under 13 and you live in the United States, you need a parent's permission to sign up for a

Hotmail account.) When kids start using MSN Messenger, your role is to help them with safety guidelines and privacy protection, and to encourage responsible use of the technology.

Here are some suggested rules for using MSN Messenger:

- Do not fill out a personal profile or a member directory profile (these profiles can be viewed by anyone using the service).
- Never talk to anyone online who has an e-mail address or IM name you don't recognize. As a parent, you should check your children's contact lists regularly to make sure they know everyone they can chat with.
- Carefully review a new buddy-list request before agreeing to let that person join your IM buddy list. If you don't want to add them, click to block them from your list.
- Never use IM to spread rumors, gossip, or hateful messages.

For more safety and privacy tips, read [10 tips for safer instant messaging](#).

To learn more about the parental controls in MSN Messenger, read [Use MSN Messenger to stay up-to-date and in control](#).

Q. [Can I read my child's instant messaging \(IM\) conversations in MSN Messenger?](#)

- A.** Yes, MSN Messenger is set up to automatically save instant messaging conversations in a folder on your computer. The default location for this folder is usually in: C:\My Documents\. (To see exactly where the folder is, open MSN Messenger, click the **Tools** menu, click **Options**, and then go to the **Messages** tab.)

Keep in mind that it's easy for kids to disable the feature that saves IM conversations. In the end, having good open dialogue with your kids is much more constructive than spying on them. They will always be one step ahead of us when it comes to technology. You need to get good rules in place, trust that your kids will follow them, and actively review the rules with your children.

Q. [How can I prevent pop-ups on my computer?](#)

- A.** The easiest way to avoid pop-ups is to use blocking software. If you have [the most updated version of Windows XP](#), Internet Explorer (your Web browser) is already equipped with a [pop-up blocker](#). If you don't use Windows XP, you may want to download a free toolbar that includes pop-up blocking, such as the [MSN Toolbar](#).

Q. [Can kids become addicted to the Internet?](#)

- A.** The Internet is a wonderful tool for young people, especially for those who have difficulties with peer interaction. Computer-savvy kids can shine on the Internet because looks and athletic ability are not important, and this can help build their self-esteem. However, excessive computer use may further isolate shy kids from their peers or take away from other activities such as homework, exercise, sleep, or spending time with others. Parents and teachers are often unaware that there is a problem until it is serious. This is because it is easy to hide online activities and because Internet addiction is not yet widely recognized.

Establish rules around home computer use and try to balance it with more physical activity. Also, make sure your Internet-connected computer is out in the open, not in your child's room.

Finally, look at your own Internet use. Do you spend hours online? If you do, your children are likely to follow your example. For tips on how to help your kids establish a healthy balance between Internet use and other activities, read [Are your kids addicted to the Internet?](#)

Q. [What should my kids know about computer viruses?](#)

- A.** A virus is a malicious software program that infects computer files or hard disk drives and then makes copies of itself. Many of the activities that kids do online can leave computers vulnerable to viruses. E-mail attachments are the most common means of distributing viruses, but viruses can also be downloaded using file-sharing and instant messaging programs.

Make sure your children understand the following:

- Never open an e-mail attachment you haven't requested.
- Configure your instant messaging program so you can't receive files from other users.
- When using file-sharing programs, never download files ending in ".exe."
- Never download any program off the Internet without checking with a parent first.

You can protect your computer by always running up-to-date [firewall and antivirus software](#), and by periodically scanning your computer for [spyware or other unwanted software](#) and immediately removing it.

Q. [I am concerned about my kids' Internet use. Can I track where they are going online?](#)

- A.** Yes, there are ways you can track where they've been online, but be aware that computer-savvy kids know how to cover their Internet tracks. It's more effective to have clear rules about Internet use and to communicate openly with your kids.

When you surf the Internet, your Web browser (such as Microsoft Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator) collects information about the places you visit and stores it on your computer.

Browsers usually keep a history of recently visited sites. Most versions of Internet Explorer have a [History button](#) on the top toolbar. If you don't see the button, or if you are a Netscape Navigator user, simply press the **Ctrl** (control) and **H** keys at the same time, which will also bring up your history listings. Double-click any listing in your history to view the site.

Browsers also make temporary copies of Web pages, known as cache files, and store them on your computer.

To view your temporary files in Internet Explorer:

1. In Internet Explorer, click **Tools**, and select **Internet Options**.
2. On the **General** tab, under the **Temporary Internet Files** area, click the **Settings** button.
3. Under the **Temporary Internet files folder** area, click the **View Files** button.

You should see a list of Web pages you or your child has recently visited, as well as images viewed and cookies placed on your computer.

There are also many kinds of software that will let you monitor various online activities, for example [MSN Premium](#) offers a set of parental controls which allow you to filter the Internet and will send you weekly activity reports that detail where your children went on the Internet, people they chatted with, and more.

You can also check out a good computer store and ask what products they recommend.

Q. [What should I do if my child is being harassed online?](#)

- A.** This is often referred to as *cyberbullying* or *griefing* and is becoming common among teenagers. If this occurs, you can block the person sending the harassing messages using the block options that come in many e-mail and instant messaging programs. Save any harassing e-mail messages and forward them to your e-mail service provider. Most providers have appropriate use policies that restrict users from harassing others over the Internet.

Kids can also be harassed and cyberbullied while playing online video games. To learn more about what you can do to help keep video gaming safe and fun for your kids, read [10 tips for dealing with game cyberbullies and griefers](#).

If the harassment consists of comments posted on a Web site, contact your Internet Service Provider (ISP) and ask for help to locate the ISP hosting the site. You can then contact the ISP and bring the offensive comments to their attention. You should also contact your local police department. Harassment is a crime, both in the real world and on the Internet. It is illegal to communicate repeatedly with someone if your communication causes them to fear for their own

safety or the safety of others.

Q. [Does filtering software work?](#)

- A.** Filtering tools may be helpful with young children, to complement—not replace—parental supervision. Filters and blockers, however, are not foolproof, and they often fail to keep out inappropriate material. They can also block a lot of useful content, which your kids may need for their school assignments.

While filters may be useful when your kids are young, as they grow older they will need to develop safe and responsible online behavior.

Q. [My teen wants to shop online. How can I be sure the site is secure?](#)

- A.** Before you allow your teenager to use your credit card online, you should give them clear guidelines about shopping online and what to look for to help keep their transactions safe and secure.

Teach them what to look for on a Web site that may indicate that it's all right to give credit card information to the site. Before shopping on a Web site, look for:

- A Better Business Bureau (or other organization) quality assurance seal that links to the appropriate Web site.
- An unbroken lock icon at the bottom corner of the page, which indicates that only you and the Web site can view financial transactions.
- An "https" (the "s" stands for secure) included in the Web site address displayed in the address box of your browser.

The items listed above can be forged, so it's important to encourage your children to ask you before they make any purchases online so you can be the final judge as to whether a Web site is safe or not. Make sure your browser supports 128-bit encryption so that your credit card number is automatically encrypted, or scrambled, before it is sent. (The latest versions of both Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator support 128-bit encryption.) For more information on safer shopping, read [Should you trust that online store?](#)

Q. [What should I look for in a kids' site privacy policy?](#)

- A.** Web site privacy policies outline how the personal information collected on the site is used, shared, and retained. It's important for parents to read a Web site's privacy policy, and show their children what to look for in a privacy policy before giving out any personal information. Sometimes these policies can be lengthy, complex, and vague.

If the Web site doesn't have a privacy policy or statement, use caution when shopping or providing personal information on that Web site.

When you read a privacy policy, you want to know:

- What information is being collected and tracked.
- How this information will be used (especially, whether it will be sold to a third party).
- Whether you have the ability to change or delete data collected from your children.
- What steps are taken to safeguard kids in chat rooms, message boards, and e-mail activities on the site.
- If the site tries to obtain verifiable, parental consent before a child releases personal information online.

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