

Navigating the Internet

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My daughter recently turned 16 and got her license. Turning 16 also marked her first foray into the blogosphere. After signing up for MySpace, we went online together to review her profile. Out went her last name, address, and any other personal identifying information. I'm not paranoid; I'm proactive. Every parent needs to be proactive when it comes to keeping their kids safe on the Internet.

Just as you need a license to drive a car, I believe you need a license to surf the Internet. A license certifies that you have certain requisite skills. When you go online, you need net literacy skills to read the cyber road signs and a navigational system to safely guide you where you've not gone before. There's a reason the Internet is called the Information Superhighway.

Consider this: Before you can get a driver license, you must complete a driver's ed course, pass a written test to receive a permit so that you can undertake the required hours of behind-the-wheel driving practice, and then pass a road test to demonstrate your driving skills. To access the Internet, you log on, point-n-click. No course, no test, no practice.

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 21 million teens go online, 12 million online teens create content for the Internet, 5 million keep a personal Web page, 4 million blog, and 8 million read them. Many have freely given out personal information, some have inadvertently been exposed to unwanted porn, others have unwittingly been victims of sexual predators, and still others have been threatened or bullied.

The cyber highway contains hazards that can be risky and dangerous, even life-threatening. Isn't it time we made sure our kids know the basic rules of the road?

Two for the road. Go online together and let kids show you where they go and what they know. Practice what to do if they encounter a risky situation and help them steer clear of cyber hazards. Tell them it's your responsibility to keep them safe in cyberspace.

Keep personal information private. Check that kids don't give out identifying information about themselves or your family when signing up for Web sites, entering contests, playing games, or creating online profiles.

Choose gender-neutral screen names. Help kids pick names that aren't offensive or sexually suggestive.

Beware of stranger danger. Make a rule not to respond to messages from people they don't know and tell a parent or trusted adult about situations that make them feel uncomfortable. Never meet an online "friend" offline without a parent present.

Practice netiquette. Make sure kids behave online: Don't be rude, hurtful, or hostile in online exchanges, forward email, IM or text messages meant to be private, spread rumors, or participate in a bully attack.

Become tech savvy. Teach kids the know-how to use the computer to protect their personal safety and the family's cyber security. Help kids block bullies, predators, and others who interact in improper ways from contacting them online. Make sure they're cautious about downloading "free" screensavers, music, and games and opening e-mail and attachments that could carry infection or invade your privacy.

Looking for more information? Check out these resources:

- www.blogsafety.com
- www.getnetwise.org
- www.isafe.org
- www.missingkids.com
- www.netfamilynews.com
- www.netsmartz.org
- www.onguardonline.gov
- www.safekids.com
- www.safeteens.com
- www.wiredsafety.com

Bobbie Eisenstock, Ph.D. develops media literacy resources and workshops for parents, educators, youth, and health professionals about the effects of media and new interactive technology on children, teens, and families. She helped to create the Common Sense Media toolkit, [Raising Media Savvy Kids](#). She is on the faculty at California State University Northridge.