Child Safety on the Internet

The Internet is an almost limitless source of information and entertainment and as such can be a great place for kids and adults alike to explore. However, there is also a darker side to the web, which is frequently sensationalised in the national press, and is rightly an area that parents should at least be aware of and also have the knowledge to protect their children against. The main worries that parents have regarding their children's online experiences are that they will become involved with individuals who aren't as they seem; that they will be exposed to 'unsuitable' material or ideas; or that they will experience online bullying. So what can be done ?

The most important technique is communication. Warn youngsters of the dangers that they could face - that 12 year old Britney that they have been Instant Messaging* might actually be 42 year old Brian! Reinforce the importance of not giving out too much personal information online; don't give addresses or phone numbers out etc. and certainly never meet people that are only online friends. Reassure them that if they are unsure of anything or if something online upsets them, that it is ok to tell either you or someone else they trust.

The most common piece of advice is to supervise the use of the PC. This does not necessarily mean that you have to sit at the computer with your child, but be on hand to guide (and monitor!) It is especially easy to do this if the computer is located in a very public part of the house - a laptop in the kitchen or a PC in the corner of the dining room. Not a popular choice for older kids!

The final technique is to use software that monitors or blocks Internet use. Depending on settings, this control software can block access to websites, email systems, chat sites etc. – or just record details for a parent to view at a later stage. Most blocking software allows sites to be blocked based on content, so all chat sites could be blocked. It is often also possible to limit Internet use to certain times of the day and most systems have an override so that parents can access online email even if the children are prevented. Many broadband packages provide this option which can be set up on the website once you have logged in. Microsoft also have this facility built in to Vista and a downloadable version for Windows XP. Blue Coat's 'K9 Web Protection' is a simple to use system that is easy to set up and free for personal use (see below for download details).

Of course, no system can guarantee 100% protection and a bright and determined youngster may find ways to circumvent protection. Ultimately it is important that children are made fully aware of the dangers and how to use the internet responsibly. The www.thinkyouknow.co.uk website is run by the Government's 'Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre'

and is great for explaining online safety to users of all ages. Remember, millions of children use the Internet safely every day and as long as a number of sensible precautions are followed, they should always have a safe experience.

If you have any ideas for future computer related articles, then please email chris@c2s2.co.uk. This article and additional links can be found at www.c2s2.co.uk/VP

----
* Instant Messaging (IM) is a form of real-time communication between two or more people based on typed text. The text is conveyed via computers connected over a network such as the Internet. A commonly used IM system is Microsoft's Windows Live Messenger – MSN.

Downloads :
http://www.microsoft.com/protect/products/family/onecarefamilysafety.mspx
http://www.k9webprotection.com/

Further Info
http://www.ceop.gov.uk/
http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/
http://www.getsafeonline.org/
http://www.microsoft.com/protect/family/default.mspx