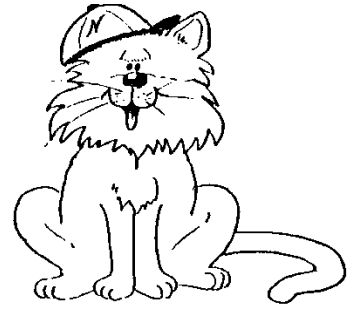


The Wildcat Word

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Keeping Kids Safe In an Online Universe

The Internet can be a wonderful resource for kids. They can use it to research school reports, communicate with distant family members and other kids, and play interactive games. Kids who are old enough to punch in a few letters on the keyboard can literally access the world.

But that access can also pose hazards. Just one missed keystroke can lead your child to a list of websites which may contain objectionable material. The anonymity of the web, the ability to immediately post and read messages without having to see the person you are communicating with face to face, may lead kids to become the victim (or the perpetrator) of cyberbullying. That's why it's important to be aware of what your kids see and hear on the Internet, who they meet, and what they share about themselves online.

Just like any safety issue, it's wise to talk with your kids about your safety rules, and keep a close eye on their activities



Because computers are in our homes and have become such a commonplace part of our lives, we sometimes forget that letting our children roam free on the internet is comparable to letting them roam free in a big city. Unless we know where they are going and who they are going to meet, it is not safe to let them go unattended. Other than not allowing them to get online in the first place, the only solution to keeping our children safe is ADULT SUPERVISION.

The most basic thing that parents can do to ensure their child's safety online is keeping your computer in a common area, where you can watch and monitor its use. When computers with internet access are in a child's bedroom, this not only increases hours spent in front of screens and decreases hours of sleep, it also allows kids to surf the web without an adult checking in to see what they are doing. Remember that other electronics (such as cell phones and computer game systems) may allow your child to access the internet as well.

You may want to take active steps to block your kids from objectionable material, by using filters and parental blocks (check with your internet provider to find out how these would work on your system). If you choose to allow your child to post a profile on a social networking site such as MySpace or Facebook, be sure your child "friends" you so that you can monitor the content of their page and who is communicating with them.

Set up some simple rules for your kids to follow while they're using the Internet, such as:



- Never reveal personal information, such as address, phone number, or school name or location. Use only a screen name.
- Do not post any photos on the web without clearing it with parents first.
- Do not respond to a threatening email or message. If a peer posts something mean or inappropriate about you on the internet, let your parents know right away.
- Always tell a parent about any communication that is scary or confusing. Never, ever agree to meet anyone you met online in person.

As your children mature and are able to make good decisions without adult help, you can offer them more freedom to surf the web on their own. Just as when our children begin to explore our neighborhoods, first we hold their hands, then walk besides them, then finally, send them out on their own to explore the larger world.