



Safe Surfing

Practical Tips to Make the Internet Safer For Your Family • By David Edgecomb

IF YOUR FAMILY IS LIKE MINE, YOU explore far off people, places, and time periods with relative ease through the magic of the Internet. Your home computer brings a wealth of educational resources into your homeschool on a daily basis that would be too expensive or too hard to find any other way. We take for granted that we can explore the microscopic view of a human hair or hear Neil Armstrong's voice from the surface of the moon decades after the event happened.

The Internet is a powerful tool for good, and we celebrate the good things we discover. We also know that there is a lot of filth in the online world. How can a family safely use the Internet without bringing unwanted content into their home and into the minds of their children?

Surf With a Purpose

When a person surfs at the beach, he first wades out into the ocean. He knows that the tides can be unpredictable, and the waves they bring can be enormous or tiny depending on several factors. Attempting to

ride every wave that comes along isn't very practical, so he waits for one that looks perfect for his purpose. Hopefully he chooses correctly and has a great experience. If not, he may be injured by a wave that is more forceful than expected, and that may have long-term negative effects on him.

Surfing the Internet can be a similar experience. Many times the trouble starts when using the web for a specific purpose turns into mindless browsing. If someone begins clicking on any random page or ad that looks appealing, he is like the surfer who doesn't care where the wave takes him. He may see text or images that are morally offensive or are inappropriate for his age. When a family sets rules and guidelines everyone enjoys the protection of knowing what's expected of them and understands that there is accountability for their actions. When family members stay on task with their computer use, many potentially unsafe activities can be avoided altogether.

Keep the Sharks Away

Just beyond the waves that provide hours of

fun, there are unseen sharks waiting to take a bite out of anyone who comes near. They aren't picky; young and old alike would satisfy their hunger. Wouldn't it be great if a surfer could take a small, inexpensive device out to the beach with him that would keep the sharks away? A surfer doesn't have that luxury, but for an online family an effective Internet content filter can be that device. Predators are waiting just beyond the safe pages of the Internet, willing to take a bite out of each member of your family. With a little effort, you can increase your odds of winning the fight they wage.

There are many good filters to choose from, including ones that are free. An effective filter allows complete customization of its features including prohibiting obscene and criminal themes, letting parents allow or disallow specific sites regardless of the content, blocking chat, setting time limits and time of day restrictions, and keeping a history of both allowed sites visited and blocked sites attempted. My favorite filter even blocks "non-productive" activities like gaming.

A Second Set of Eyes

It's important to remember that all software filters have limits. Even when working perfectly, they cannot block every possible threat among billions of websites. A careful surfer respects the immense power of the ocean and he would never leave the shore without the protection of someone alongside or nearby. He provides a second set of eyes in the lookout for possible danger and can call for help if needed. Adding a second set of eyes to watch for Internet danger at home is just as valuable. To keep more eyes involved, put the computer in a high-traffic area of the home where it is highly visible. Face the computer screen out so that it is easily seen by others. Placing the computer in the kitchen or school room is preferred over putting it in a den, office, or child's bedroom. A good rule of thumb is, if it has a door on it, it's probably not the right room.

One of the rules we've established in our home is that the children need to ask a parent for permission to be online. That helps us as parents to be more aware that they are using the Internet. We also reinforce safe use by occasionally asking what they're looking at online. We'll walk over and comment with excitement about the usefulness or importance of what the child is researching. Genuinely wanting to be involved is part of why we're homeschooling in the first place, so including ourselves in their online activities is natural. If some unwanted content gets through despite our precautions, we've taught the children to simply turn off the power to the computer screen and come tell us. This also brings peace of mind when the child is using someone else's computer that may not have a filter in place. Our younger children know that they need to have one of us close by while they're online, which allows us the opportunity to teach them to use the computer safely.

The Internet is a powerful tool for good and evil. It can be as unpredictable as the ocean which brings smiles to playful children on one shore and a tidal wave to communities on another. Knowing how to ride the waves carefully can help protect your home from unwanted Internet content and bring you safely to many rewarding destinations. 🏠

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