If you wanted to know…

How to protect your child's privacy online

… Read on …

If your son or daughter — like many Canadian children — uses a computer at home or at school to send and receive e-mail and/or visit websites, you should ask yourself these questions.

When spending time on the Internet,

1) Does your child provide information about him or herself or other family members, if requested?

2) Do you know if anyone is collecting personal information about your child?

3) Do you know what type of personal information might be collected?

4) Do you know how your child's personal information might be used?

Your child may not have asked you if he or she should provide the personal information requested. Many children are used to filling out forms about themselves — since their early days in school, so they just do it.

If your son or daughter does log onto websites, he or she is most likely being asked for some personal information. Some sites want information about the child alone, while others want information about the entire family.

The Internet is a rich resource that can help stimulate a child's mind. But your child needs to be made aware that the Internet is a network of networks, ruled by no one. Personal information should never simply be handed out without careful consideration. Tell them, "You don't have to give it out just because someone is asking."

Advertisers and marketers have begun to target online the rapidly growing numbers of children (under 13 years) and youth (13–18 years). As noted by the Centre for Media Education, websites and other interactive online services are being designed to capture the loyalty and spending power of the "lucrative cybertot category."[1]

A number of responsible websites ensure that they receive a parent's verified and informed consent before a child discloses any personal information. (The age that an individual can give his or her consent varies depending on the circumstances. When considering the disclosure of personal information, in most situations, the person who has lawful custody of a child may be able to give consent.)

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[1] Centre for Media Education, http://tap.epn.org/cme/cmonad.html (as of Nov. 19, 1999)

Some websites, however, make no effort to obtain parental approval.

In addition, some children are spending hours online in "chat rooms," unaware of who they are talking to and the potential dangers to their safety and privacy. Some of these chat rooms ask children to provide personal information about themselves, such as their age, sex, telephone number, address, grade level, personal preferences, and a picture or physical description of themselves.

The Issues

Computers with Net access allow children to interact with the world. It is precisely this interaction that parents need to understand.

For parents, there are two major issues to consider when your son or daughter goes online — safety and privacy. While providing personal information to strangers can be a threat to both, this publication focuses primarily on privacy.

For many children, privacy is a nebulous concept that may not seem very important. Providing personal information to someone who isn't in the same room with them may not seem threatening in any way.

But more and more companies and organizations want to collect and use personal information for marketing or other commercial purposes. Many companies develop detailed profiles based on the personal information they collect — information about your child that you may not want them to have.

Internet-research firm Jupiter Communications estimates that by 2002, 21.9 million kids (ages 5 to 12) and 16.6 million teens (13–18) will be online in the U.S. alone — these are remarkable increases of 155% and 97% respectively from 1998.[2]

We think it is vital to teach children how to safeguard their privacy, as well as their family's privacy. Here are some tips for parents to consider.

Tips for Parents

- Take an active role in protecting your children's privacy whenever they are asked to submit personal information. Teach your children to be "Net smart," just like you would teach them to be "street smart," i.e., warn them not to give out any personal information, such as their name, age, home address, phone number, postal code, school attended, height, weight, likes, dislikes, etc., without your permission.

- Consider becoming "computer savvy" yourself. If you aren't already computer literate, take a course to learn the basics. Become familiar with parental control tools such as browsers and filtering software that can prevent children from accessing inappropriate sites. You can then determine if these tools are appropriate for your situation. Many online services and Internet service providers (ISPs) will help direct parents to programs (such as Net Nanny and CYBERsitter) that prohibit children from accessing adult-oriented chat rooms and bulletin boards. Talk to your ISP.

- Be clear with your children on appropriate Net behaviour, that is, the amount of time it's okay to be on the Net, times when they can use the computer, and what they are allowed to do, including whether they can, on their own, visit websites they have not been to before. Set up clear rules with your children. If other children visit your home and use your computer, make sure that they follow your rules.

- Monitor your children's online behaviour and know the sites they visit frequently — many parents have situated the home computer in a high traffic area of the home, such as the kitchen or family room, so that they can 'keep an eye' on what sites their children visit.

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[2] "The Kids are Online," *E.W. Internet*, November 12, 1999, pp. 35–36.

- Check the websites your children visit and give them feedback on whether the sites are appropriate for their age levels.

- Monitor any chat rooms that your children want to visit (such as a site dedicated to sports or a music star) and discourage them from providing any personal information. Even if the site is appropriate for their ages, you still don't know who may be lurking in the wings, reading all the kids' messages posted to the site.

- If possible, have your children use pseudonyms in chat rooms and on bulletin boards — some kids think this is pretty "cool," so it may not be a hard sell. Alternatively, some Internet service providers allow a subscriber to use a number of different e-mail addresses, one of which could be used for chat rooms, rather than an address that could lead to your child.

- Do not list any of your children's names with your Internet service provider.

- Look for a privacy policy on each website and determine how information collected from children will be treated.

- As well as getting your children to guard their personal information, you also need to be careful about the information that **you** disclose over the Net about your children, including health information.

- Discuss with your children's teachers what type of online homework or research they are doing at school.

- Whenever possible, actively participate in helping to set school computer policies which may affect your children.
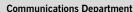
The Internet is a great communications tool, but children need to be taught that, just like any other tool, you need to exercise considerable care in how you use it.