

## **Tips for Parents**

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Children are adopting technology at a younger age, which presents new challenges for parents to stay up-to-date on how to best protect their kids. With children as young as age four gaming with peers online, and seven-year-olds texting in phonetic shorthand, parenting these tech-savvy tots and pre-teens can seem a dizzying undertaking. But there are easy-to-use, effective tools available today that allow parents to stay in the driver's seat of their children's TV, Internet, phone and wireless activities. The key is in knowing where to start, and how to move forward in a way that is right for the individual child.

### **Do your homework.**

- Determining the right technology boundaries for your children requires upfront legwork.
- First, understand children's technology habits – evaluate what technologies they're using and how they're using them.
- Research tools for monitoring children's activities and conduct an assessment of how often your children are surfing the Web and chatting with friends via instant messenger services, e-mail and text message.
- Watch their favorite TV programs with them to fully understand the content.
- Ask children what the most popular technologies are within their circle of friends. For example, how many kids do they know have MySpace pages? How appealing do they find online gaming? What would they *like* to be doing online or with their cell phones, if they could?
- Next, find out what parental controls are available. AT&T Smart Limits brings together information on the privacy and protection features available to subscribers of the company's high speed Internet, TV, home phone, and wireless services. The site is a show-and-tell of how parents can simply and sensibly safeguard their children against misuse of technology.

### **Test the technology.**

- Log on and experiment with the technologies they're using. For example, instant message a relative. Ask someone for a tutorial on text messaging – and text message with your children. It's critical for parents to speak the language of technology that their kids are speaking.
- After determining which parental controls work best, parents should establish and test these controls to ensure their children are protected when using today's technology.

### **Set boundaries – and put 'em in writing.**

- Parents should initiate discussions with their children about appropriate and inappropriate uses of technology. Parents and children should agree to household rules on surfing the Web, watching TV, and chatting with friends – whether that's by instant messenger, on the phone, or text messaging.
- As with children's other activities, the more responsible the child, the more lenient you can be in setting boundaries. It's critical to aim for balance. Children who enjoy Web hobbies should be allowed to pursue those interests, but not to the point of being allowed to forgo family time, exercising or studying.
- Institute at least a verbal contract, but strongly consider having family members sign a written contract, which will help eliminate misinterpretation of the rules agreed upon.

**Establish clear lines between behavior and consequence.**

- Kids need and like to have what's expected of them spelled out. But many times they won't heed suggestions in the absence of consequence. Parents need to avoid ambiguity – gray areas are tricky in establishing boundaries for kids. Parents should strive to make the rules and consequences perfectly clear.
- The “action-consequence” approach can reinforce positive behavior and outcomes, and work to minimize negative behavior and outcomes. An example of this approach is to revoke or limit technology use if a child fails to adhere to his or her side of the bargain, such as trying to visit restricted Web sites or TV channels. Likewise, parents can reward children with texting minutes or increased Internet time for improving grades or completing homework without a hassle.
- Technology use is an extremely powerful motivator to children today. The key is to be consistent and specific when administering reward and punishment.

**Do random checks.**

- Parents have both the right and responsibility to check up on children's technology activities.
- The most effective way to ensure children follow the rules is to conduct random checks. If kids know their parents will be reviewing their email accounts every Wednesday, they're likely to delete inappropriate content each Tuesday. Parents should check cell phones or log on to MySpace accounts intermittently.
- Importantly, parents should let children know when they've reviewed their activities to reinforce that adherence to technology rules is a top priority in the home.

**Draw parallels between the physical world and the virtual world.**

- Children today live in a split universe, socializing with peers on the playground and in chat rooms interchangeably. Fortunately, many adages are just as relevant in a child's virtual world as they are in the child's physical world.
- For example, when teaching a young child to avoid strangers, parents need to explain how the Internet is a public place and they should never email people they don't know. Parents should reinforce that children need to tell a trusted adult about Web sites, online conversations or text messaging that make them feel uneasy.
- When using technology, children can feel “anonymous” and think that disrespect, naming calling and rumors are untraceable. Parents need to indicate that children's actions online are every bit as real and visible as their actions in the physical world.

**Above all, don't be afraid.**

- Parents should not be afraid to set limits, even if they are less savvy about the technology than their children.
- Consider this analogy: Parents who have never heard of their child's favorite band can still monitor how many hours each day the child is listening to his or her MP3, or how loud the child is blasting CDs from their bedroom.

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