

A Beginner's Guide to Going Online

INTRODUCTION

The Internet offers us many opportunities. It's a communication medium that allows us to socialize, conduct business, do research, entertain and play. We often think of it as a tool that links us with the rest of the world. In many ways, it actually creates its own world. Like any other tool, if you use the Internet the right way, you can reap numerous benefits. If you use it the wrong way, however, it can do harm. It's true that accidents can happen, but it's also true that you can learn from them and move on with a little more wisdom and awareness.

When you log on to the Internet, a whole new world is opened for you. Right from your desk you can read the daily newspapers in Cairo, get a recipe for Congolese chicken soup, watch live streaming video of polar bears in the Arctic, and so much more. You can become a more active citizen; for example, 56% of all Americans involved in civic or political activities use digital tools to communicate with and mobilize groups. With the Internet you can apply to college, adopt a homeless pet or catch up with your best friend in Japan. The possibilities are endless, and new advancements are being made every day that make the Internet an

indispensable part of our work, education and daily lives.

However, there are some things that happen on the Internet that may be harmful. At the LAMP, we don't believe that fear has to be part of the online experience; in fact, we prefer to use the term "cyber wellness" instead of "Internet safety." There are many ways the Internet can be a positive tool for your school or family, and most of them don't require a great deal of technical skill or expensive software.

For interesting, up-to-date, information about ways to think about the Internet and what is called "cyberculture," the following website from the University of San Francisco is a great resource: <http://rccs.usfca.edu/intro.asp>

THE BASICS: MAKE MEDIA A FAMILY AFFAIR

Talk to your kids

This is the first step that every parent should take in helping their child to have a positive online experience. Ask your kids what sites they visit, to whom they write messages, and which online topics interest



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WHAT'S THE LAMP?

With a commitment to address the lack of basic media literacy education in New York City schools and communities, The LAMP (Learning About Multimedia Project) offers free workshops and public events designed to help young people, parents and teachers make sense of the media barrage they encounter in their daily lives. LAMP workshops not only demystify the content and technologies of media, but they also help bridge the digital divide that often alienates youth from adults, while providing the workforce development skills needed to compete in a modern job market. By creating and editing their own blogs, videos, newspapers and more, students are further encouraged to explore the use of media as a positive outlet for creative expression.

WHO IS THE LAMP?

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WHERE IS THE LAMP?

thelampnyc.org



SCAN THIS QR
CODE WITH YOUR
iPHONE TO GO
TO OUR WEBSITE
RIGHT NOW!

them. Just as you might ask about what they learned in school today, or about the movie they saw last night, ask them what they learned online today. Asking with concern and interest instead of critical accusation will encourage honesty in these discussions. Use them as an opportunity to learn more about your child, and to learn more about the Internet.

Use it yourself

It is crucial for parents and educators to explore the Internet on their own. Explore websites that interest you as well as those that interest your children, set up your own social networking page or start your own blog. There are a lot of great things to do online, and there is no reason for you to miss out on the many ways the Internet can be used. As you browse the web and become more connected, you'll discover the numerous opportunities opened up by the Internet and have a better understanding of how it works. It is never too late to learn.

Explore it together

Kids are full of questions. The next time one comes up, try sitting down in front of the computer and finding the answer online. Help them understand how search engines work, or point them toward valuable resources you've found in your own surfing. Watch videos together, play games together online and have them take you to the sites they like to visit. Ask them questions about what they like and the different media they explore. If you find something interesting, call your child over to share it. If you decide to set up a social networking page, have your child help you do it. Young people take their cues from adults, and they will learn to use the Internet positively when they see you doing the same..

For more information about family and the Internet, read "Children's Internet Use in a Family Context: Influence on Family Relationships and Parental Mediation," by Sook-Jung Lee and Young-Gil Chae, *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2007.

GAMING

Playing video games on the Internet is a little different from the way people used to play video games on consoles at home. Online, your child or teen can play with someone on the other side of the world, and chat during a game. It's important that you know what kinds of games your child is playing, and that you set boundaries about how much time can be spent playing a game online. Different games have varying levels of privacy settings; some are very violent and some are not at all violent. Remember that when we talk about gaming online, we mean every type of game, including a fantasy narrative games like *World of Warcraft*, interactive crossword puzzles, poker or educational games such as those found at <http://www.arcademicskillbuilders.com>, or at <http://www.funbrain.com>. Gaming can be used for many different purposes—some even exist for the sole purpose of marketing a product—but it is still important that you know what your kids are doing, and check the ratings of the games they play. Online games can be great fun, but the chat features on some games can enable contact with strangers or unsavory language exchanges at the height of competition.



➔ Disney, Asus launch 'Netpal' netbook for kids // © 2009, Asus

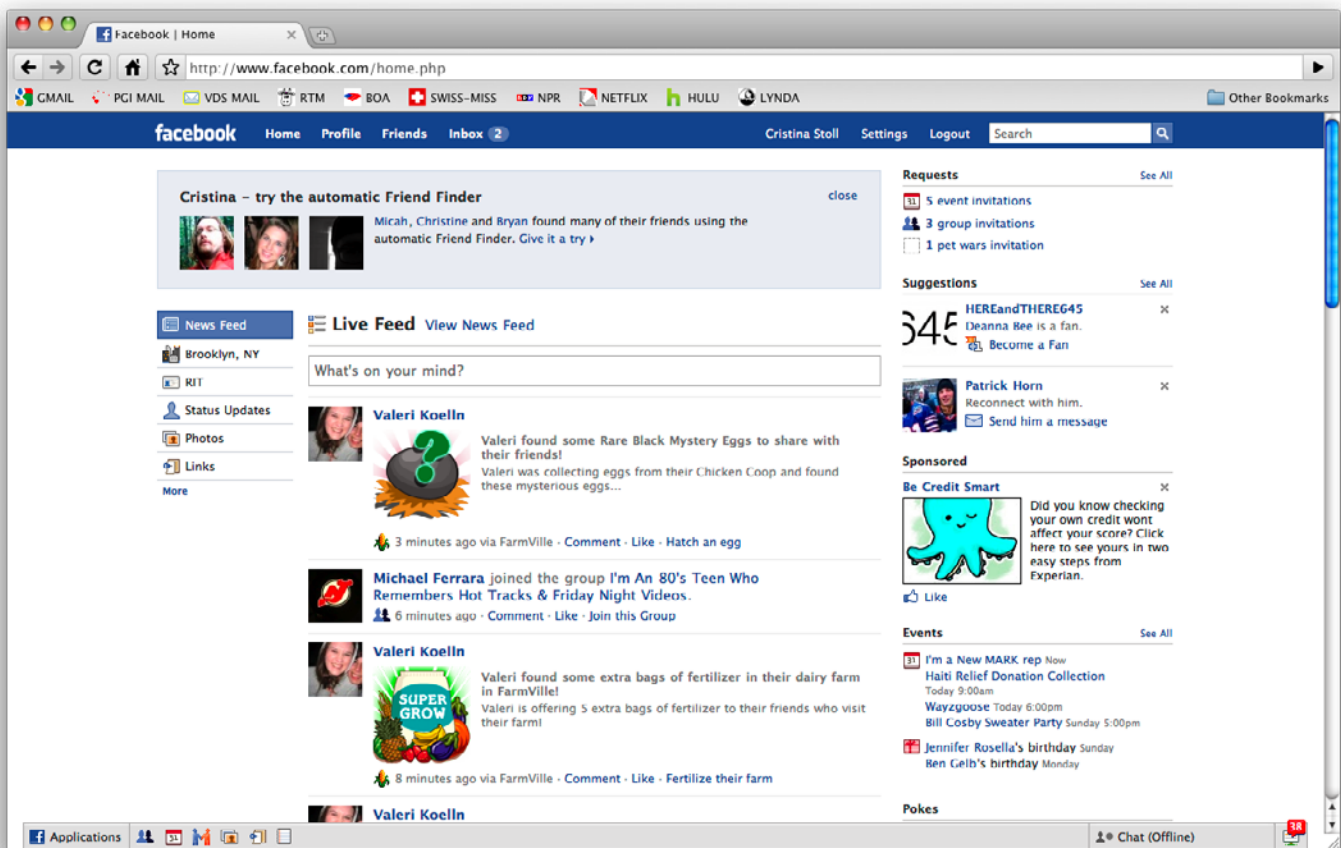
An interesting study on youth and online games was conducted by academic researchers in Taiwan: *The Relationship Between Leisure Satisfaction and Life Satisfaction of Adolescents Concerning Online Games*, by Edward Shih-Tse Wang, Lily Shui-Lian Chen, Julia Ying-Chao Lin, and Michael Chih-Hung Wang, in the international journal *Adolescence*, vol. 43, no. 169, spring 2008.

SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

Social media sites like MySpace and Facebook are extremely popular among teens and adults. They can help you share photos, send fast messages, make an announcement, find a job and more. Most also have applications that allow you to play games online with friends, receive updates from groups or areas of interest, find old classmates or build your online profile, and more applications are developed every day. Networking via social media sites can be very robust and fulfilling.

The makers of popular social media sites like MySpace and Facebook are well aware of some of the dangers posed by their sites, and encourage their users to report cases of privacy abuse. In addition, your child can set his or her own privacy settings. A profile can be entirely private and viewable only by invitation, or it can be public and open to anyone. Degrees of privacy exist where portions of a profile (like contact information) may be kept private, while other portions of a profile (like the name of your favorite TV show) can be public. Again, talk to your child about what he or she wants to achieve with an online profile, then talk about what kind of privacy settings are appropriate. Once your child has set up a profile, set up your own and send a friend request through your profile so you can see what he or she is doing.

Facebook and MySpace both have age limits set for their users. The minimum age to be on Facebook is 13 years old, and the minimum age for MySpace is 14. However, sometimes children misrepresent themselves, and there is no way for Facebook or MySpace to definitively verify when this happens. If you discover that your underage child has created a profile, send an email to the networking site stating the age of your child and the profile address. Following review, the profile may be deleted. (You can usually find the email address to use in the privacy section of the site.) Bear in mind as well that sometimes kids create profiles that are parent-friendly, and then have additional ones under a different name that are



Facebook homepage // © 2009, Facebook

less than parent-friendly. Once again, the best thing you can do is talk to your kids openly and honestly. At the very least, you should know which sites your child is on, and make sure that both of you know how to contact the site if something happens. Your child should also know how to block emails, and that he or she must let you know of any unwanted online contact.

If your child is younger than 13 or 14, there are still options for social networking. New social networks for the pre-teen set are constantly being created, some of which incorporate educational games. As an example, one of the more popular pre-teen network is Club Penguin, intended for ages 6 to 14. The developers of Club Penguin have several measures in place to protect its users, including live human chat moderators, swearing filters (violators are banned for 24 hours), and a “safe chat” mode where users write messages using a set list of options. A few other popular pre-teen social networking sites include Webkinz, Whyville, Imbee and Woogi World. It’s up to you to decide upon an appropriate age for your child to start exploring social networking, and work with him or her to enforce the house rules.

An interesting study of youth and social networking sites is: “Personal Information of Adolescents on the Internet: A Quantitative Content Analysis of MySpace,” by Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin, in *Journal of Adolescence*, vol. 31, issue 1, February, 2008.

INSTANT MESSAGING

Instant messaging, or IMing, is another popular way for people to chat online. A form of instant messaging is installed on most major email platforms and social networking sites. This means that when you’re on Gmail, Yahoo!, Hotmail or Facebook, you can chat with anyone in your network of contacts who is online at the same time as you. Instant messaging can also be done from many mobile phones, making it a popular option for people whose mobile plans have a limited number of texts per month. IMing has also spawned its own language, sometimes called ‘lol speak.’ In lol speak, common phrases are broken down into acronyms, such as ‘lol’ for ‘laughing out loud’ or ‘btw’ for ‘by the way.’ Words may purposely misspelled to shorten them, so that ‘you’ becomes ‘u’ and ‘tomorrow’ becomes ‘tmrw.’ For the most part, lol speak is used to spend less time typing a message.

Instant messaging can be very useful--indeed, it is one of the few social media platforms that has been embraced by the corporate world. Groups can collaborate online, share messages, links and files in real time, it is easy to get an answer to a quick questions and there is no fuzzy reception or phone bill to get in the way of “talking” as much as you want. As a result, instant messaging can be very addictive. It is up to you to set boundaries in your house about how much time can be spent instant messaging.

It is also important to monitor contact lists. In most programs, you can toggle a privacy setting so that only people in your network (friend on Facebook, contact in your email account) can send you a message. Or, you can receive messages from



➔ Children in class using the Internet as a learning tool



➔ Children in Sweden browsing the Internet

anyone who knows your screen name, which is a nickname used for online activities--frequently, this is the same as your email address. It is generally not a good idea to chat with someone online who you don't know offline, although there are certainly exceptions. In either case, if something happens in a chat which is uncomfortable or offensive, you have the ability to send the person a warning message, or block the user altogether so that he or she cannot contact you again.

As with all other online activities, talk to your children about who they chat with over instant messenger. Respect their privacy, but make sure they know that if something happens, they can come to you with the problem.

FILTERS: WHAT THEY CAN AND CANNOT DO

Filters can be used to help keep your child from finding material online that may not be appropriate for him or her. They can block websites and emails, monitor online messaging, record which sites your child visits and much more. It's up to you to decide how much you want to control. For a good start to finding the filter that's right for you, visit <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/>, or do a search for reviews of the most recent products. However, before you spend money on specialized software, keep in mind that most search engines and browsers (Google, Yahoo!, Explorer, Safari) also have built-in filters that can be activated and toggled to suit your needs, and most of them are free. You might already have what you need, and just not know it yet.

As you set up filters on your home computer, remember that software is no match when compared to parental supervision. **FILTERS CANNOT BLOCK EVERYTHING.** They are not fool-proof magic locks. Yes, they can get pretty sophisticated, but some of the things you want to block can also get pretty sophisticated. The people who write programs and viruses (in addition to those who write adults-only content) are constantly looking for ways to get around filters, and they usually figure it

out eventually. This is all not to mention that kids who are especially good with computers may be able to find a way to work around controls. Plus, your home computer is not the only one your child uses. Your children probably also use the computer at a friend's house, at school or in the library, and filters vary depending on the individual computer and its administrator. For example, New York City's Department of Education has blocked access to YouTube, Facebook and Myspace on all computers in public schools, but you can log on to any of these sites from a computer in the Brooklyn Public Library system. Overall, filters are a good idea, but using them is not the end of your work when it comes to helping your kid have a positive experience online.

The best thing you can do for your children is steer them towards positive content, encourage honesty when talking about their online activities, and help them understand why some things might not be right for them. Help your child to know that his or her well-being is your first concern, and that if something bad does happen, you need to know about it. Let them know they won't be blamed for mistakes or accidents, and also show them how to contact their email or Internet service provider with complaints about unwanted messages or filter loopholes.

ONLINE ETHICS

When we raise our kids, we try to teach good manners and how to treat others with kindness. We encourage them to say please and thank you, refrain from insults and respect people from all walks of life. These same rules are all applicable in the virtual world, too. Manners help us live together in harmony. They can be easy to forget online, but it is of the utmost importance for you to help your kids remember them. The open forum format of the Internet is one of the best things about it, but must be used responsibly.



Family together on a “reading night”

So far, the Internet has proven very difficult to regulate without violating First Amendment rights. In the spirit of democracy, anyone can say just about anything, and it is up to each of us to act responsibly. Unfortunately, as in life, there are those who say things that are harmful or false. When this happens online, it is most often referred to as cyberbullying. A cyberbully might leave cruel comments on someone else’s profile or post embarrassing photos or videos, among other things. If your child is either the victim or the perpetrator of cyberbullying, you need to exercise zero tolerance. Talk with your child, talk with your child’s school and/or teacher and send an email to the social networking site or program where the cyberbullying is taking place. (See the note about TRUSTe in our Links section—they may be able to help in some cyberbullying situations.) Help your child to understand early on that they shouldn’t say anything online that they wouldn’t say to someone in person, and also that a lot can get lost in online communication. What is intended is sarcasm doesn’t always translate as such in an email or instant message. In a conflict, speaking with someone directly is still the best way to work things out.

One thing that makes online manners a little more complex has to do with the permanence of online content. When you, your child or anyone else puts up anything on the Internet, it can be very difficult to remove. In some ways this can be good; you have the power to put up anything you want and that can help you find your voice. Just know that it might be there forever. Anyone could grab that blog post you wrote or that picture with you in it, and duplicate it elsewhere. When you decide you’d rather not have a goofy picture of yourself for all the world to see—perhaps while applying to school or a job—you can take it down from your profile, but you can’t force someone else to do the same thing. It cannot be erased completely. It is critical that your children understand the many ways that the Internet can have an impact on their lives and on the lives of others.

For a reasoned discussion about one area of online ethics and safety, read “Online ‘Predators’ and Their Victims: Myths, Realities, and Implications for Prevention and Treatment,” by Janis Wolak, David Finkelhor, Kimberly J. Mitchell and Michele L. Ybarra. In *American Psychologist*, vol. 63, no. 2, February-March, 2008.

RESPECT THE MEDIUM

When people talk about the different ways that young people and adults interact with technology, they often mention something called the digital divide. This is a term used in part to describe the disconnect that some parents feel with their children, having grown up in very different worlds, and it can sometimes make it difficult for young people and adults to understand one another. The divide falls mostly (but not only) along generational boundaries, so that, perhaps, adults who memorized their multiplication tables in a classroom don't understand how their children now learn the same thing with the help of a computer program. Likewise, those same children probably cannot imagine a world without e-mail, cell phones, texting or Wi-fi, and might not understand adults who still prefer to make a phone call rather than email.

It is important that parents, educators and young people respect the fact they all grew up in different digital environments. The younger generation has learned to do things differently, and that way is not necessarily better or worse than the way things were done twenty years ago. For example, students don't necessarily have to go to the library anymore to read classics like *Moby Dick*; many of these texts can now be found online. Furthermore, young people are usually more accustomed to reading from a computer screen than their adult counterparts, even for hours at a stretch. One important thing to remember is that whether your child is reading it from a printed page or from a computer screen, it is still *Moby Dick*. The experience of reading off a laptop is certainly different from the experience from a printed book, but who's to say one way is better or worse than the other? As an adult, respect the fact that your children are still reading the same books you read. They're just doing it differently.

However, the need for respect certainly flows both ways. Both young people and adults need to be patient with each other while navigating the wide world of online media. It might be new, but it doesn't have to be frightening. With a little effort and guidance, the Internet experience can be wholly satisfying and positive for everyone.

There is debate among scholars, educators, and many others, about what it means to read online as opposed to reading printed matter. While both involve the use of text, it is certainly a different experience in each case, which has to do with the physical characteristics of each medium, and much more. To find out more about the sides of this debate, read "Literacy Debate: Online, R U Really Reading?" by Motoko Rich, *The New York Times*, Section A, page 1, July 27, 2008.

GENERAL TIPS FOR GOING ONLINE

- Keep the home computer in an open location, like the family room. Do not allow your child to have a computer in his or her bedroom, as this makes it harder for you to monitor their activity. Having the computer in an open space also makes it easier for you to use it as a family and share your online experiences.
- Put a limit on the number of hours that your child can be online. As fun and enriching as it can be, the digital world is no replacement for the physical world. The sometimes painful task of enforcing a limit on computer time can help keep your child from becoming so engrossed in the Internet

that he or she loses track of relationships and responsibilities offline.

- Teach your kids never to open attachments or emails from someone they don't know. It could be a virus, spyware or other program that can compromise any personal information stored in the computer or it can virtually destroy the entire machine.
- Never share any passwords, and teach your kids never to share their passwords with anyone else, for any reason.
- Don't share any contact information with someone online unless you and your child are absolutely sure that you know who it is. One good rule of thumb is whether or not you or your child interacts with the other person offline and on a regular basis.
- Check your computer frequently for illegal peer-to-peer (P2P) downloading software, and talk to your kids about some of the ramifications of illegally downloading copyright material like movies, music or TV shows.

To get solid, up-to-date information on copyright law, and the Fairness Doctrine, which explains which materials can legally be downloaded, copied, and used in digital productions of all kinds, visit www.centerforsocialmedia.org/fair_use and click on "code of best practices."

SOME OF OUR FAVORITE WEBSITES

- ➔ bbc.co.uk/cbbc
Website for Children's BBC network, with fun games and access to CBBC shows (preschoolers).
- ➔ commonsensemedia.org
Common Sense Media reviews family movies, movie rentals, new movies, TV shows, CDs, books, magazines and web sites.
- ➔ findingdulcinea.com/guides
Great series of online guides explaining a wide range of topics, including illegal file downloading, how to choose a search engine, web site credibility and many other subjects.
- ➔ google.com
Play games, send email, research, browse the web, go shopping, make a blog, find a blog, set up a blog reader, watch videos, make a photo album, translate a web page...do anything.
- ➔ jpl.org
The Internet Public Library is an excellent resource center for just about everything—find newspapers from all over the world, read books and magazines, view special online museum exhibits, and much more. Also has special sections for kids and teens called KidSpace and TeenSpace.
- ➔ linkedin.com
Professional networking site for adults—find a job, find a colleague, post opportunities.
- ➔ nationalgeographic.com/ngm/polarbearcam
As mentioned in the introduction, here's where you can watch live streaming video of polar bears.
- ➔ pbskids.org
Games featuring characters from shows such as Clifford, Dragon Tales, Sesame Street, Barney and Teletubbies.
- ➔ pbskids.org/go
Games featuring characters from shows such as Arthur, Cyberchase, Word Girl, Maya & Miguel and History Detectives for Kids.
- ➔ truste.org
Works with over 2,000 online businesses to make sure that online privacy standards are maintained. If you believe your privacy has been violated, visit this site to see if the website or business in question is a member. If it is, TRUSTe will work as a mediator to resolve the situation.
- ➔ yahoo.com
Another extremely popular search engine providing news, email, photo sharing and more.