



Consumer Federation of America

The Internet, Privacy, and Your Child

What you need to know as a parent



Ask yourself this question: *How would you react if a complete stranger approached your child on the street and asked for his or her name, address, phone number, and other personal information?*

The answer may seem obvious, but the odds are that, if your child is on the Internet, he or she may be asked to give away personal information to strangers in the form of businesses or others operating on the Internet.

There is no doubt that the Internet is a major and welcome technological advance in the life of many Americans. However, you may not know that some corporations are making use of the Internet's capacity to collect private information from the individuals who use it - including your child and you.

This brochure explains the issues surrounding privacy on the Internet and what you and your child can do to preserve your

family's privacy.

YOUR CHILD AND THE INTERNET

If your initial response to the privacy issue and other concerns is to keep your child off the Internet, consider the following:

- **The Internet can be a major learning tool.** The Internet is a genuine powerhouse of educational and entertainment resources. It can be an important and useful tool to help enrich and educate your child.
- **The Internet could help to boost your child's future.** Studies show that young people with computer skills earn 10-15 percent more than those without. It is estimated that half a million jobs in America already require the kind of technical literacy that can come from mastering the Internet.

PRIVACY ISSUES AND THE INTERNET

The rapid rise of businesses on the Internet means that your child is now being exposed to more and more commercial messages in cyberspace. Given the natural curiosity and trustful nature of children, the potential exists for them to surrender their privacy ... without even realizing that they have done so! If you want to help safeguard your child's privacy, you need to first understand the issues and then start working directly with your child. Here are some of

the key ways that privacy issues come up for children on the Internet:

- **Surveys** — your child may be required to fill out questionnaires in order to enter sites, join clubs, play games, move to “special” portions of a Web site, etc.
- **Gifts** — sometimes offered in exchange for information about children and families.
- **Sign-ups** — children may be asked to spill the beans through registration or “for more information” screens required for membership, game upgrades, and so on.
- **Activity** — your child may be invited to give up personal information in the course of participating in a chat room or making a post to a message board.

“COOKIES” AND YOUR PRIVACY

Anything called “cookies” has to be pretty harmless, right? Actually, your Web browser may be using what are known as “cookies” to intrude on your privacy. “Cookies” are files placed on your computer that are used to track where you go and what you do within certain Web sites. They allow companies to create individual profiles on people who visit their sites. “Cook-ies” also can be used to create tailor-made messages directed at you or your kids. To guard against this practice, you can open up the options setting in your Web browser and change it so that a Web site will have to get your permission to place a “cookie” on your computer.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Some companies employ cookies in a responsible fashion in order to set up customized services for individuals and to permit purchases over the Internet. Responsible companies will prominently disclose how the cookies are used, how you can opt out, and so on. Check it out!

PROTECTING YOUR CHILD

Here are constructive steps you can take to help protect the privacy of your child and yourself:

- **Talk to your child about privacy on the Web**; make sure that he or she understands not to give away personal information on the Web. Instruct your child to ask for your permission before surrendering personal information on the Web. This will allow you to weigh whether the information being collected seems like a privacy violation.
- **Make it clear** to your child that he or she should not give out personal information such as name, address, phone number, e-mail address, age, school, past or planned purchases, amount of allowance, and so on.
- **Be around when your child is online.** Place the family computer in a highly visible place and check in periodically. Children move through Web sites quickly and the enticements to give up personal information are numerous. Take time to surf with your child.
- **Understand the limits on “blocking” software**, such as Surf Watch, CyberSitter, Net Nanny and X-Stop, which are designed to screen out certain things, like sexually explicit, violent, or hate language content. Remember: No software is unbeatable. There is simply no substitute for your active involvement in your child’s Web experiences.

- **Make sure that your child knows about advertising** and how it works. Keep in mind that some Web sites are aimed at children as young as four to six years old!
- If you think a Web site is collecting inappropriate information, **send an e-mail message to register your objection** with the company sponsoring the site. You should also notify the Federal Trade Commission, who has an ongoing interest in this issue, through their Web site at www.ftc.gov.
- **Steer your child to non-commercial sites** with good content. (See our “Good Sites for Your Kid” list.)
- **Be constructive.** If your child has already made a mistake about privacy, use the experience as a learning opportunity. If, when surfing together, you and your child find a site that may violate privacy, use it as an opportunity to underscore your concerns.
- **Come up with family projects** that can be done on the Internet, such as planning a summer vacation, building a family Web page, picking a charity for a donation, and finding a book on a hobby.

“CRASH COURSES” ABOUT THE INTERNET

What if your child knows a lot more about the Web than you do? You are not alone!

Fortunately, there are excellent resources that you can use as a parent to take a “crash course” on using the Web and find good resources for yourself and your children. Here are some Web-based resources that you can check out:

- American Library Association www.ala.gov/parents/index.html
- National Parent Information Network npin.org
- A Parents’ Guide to the Internet www.familyguidebook.com
- Net-Mom www.netmom.com

If you are concerned about potential non-privacy problems on the Web that your child may face, check out the following information:

- Larry Magid on child safety www.larrysworld.com/safeteens.htm
- Netparents www.netparents.org

GOOD SITES FOR KIDS!

Looking for a place to start on the Web where privacy isn’t a concern? Here are some places to begin:

- Library of Congress www.loc.gov
- National Aeronautic Space Administration starchild.gsfc.nasa.gov
- Public Broadcasting Service www.pbs.org
- U.S. National Park Service www.nps.gov

Who We Are

Consumer Federation of America (CFA) is a non-profit association of some 240 pro-consumer groups, with a combined membership of 50 million, that was founded in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through advocacy and education.

The Center for Media Education (CME) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of electronic media, especially on behalf of children and families. Together with CFA, CME has been encouraging implementation of safeguards to protect children's privacy. To learn more, visit: www.cme.org/cme.

MCI, headquartered in Washington, D.C., is a leading provider of local-to-global communication services to business, government and residential users.