Protecting Children Online
Steps Toward Making Your Computer "Weirdo-Proof"

It's an unfortunate fact of reality, but children are the most victimized computer users on the Internet today. The good news is that there are some practical steps you can take to protect your children from sexual predators, hackers, and other seedy individuals who want to cause harm. This article will describe a few of them.

The first step in protecting your children at the computer is to prevent their access to passwords. This will keep them from sharing passwords with others and inadvertently enabling hacking into your system. If you think about it, there's no reason why a five, seven, or even twelve year old needs to know the passwords to sensitive areas on the computer unless you've given them permission! In fact, children don't need to know the password used to access the Internet either. It may be a hassle to type it in each time they want to get online, but it's better to know the times that they connect than to have them sneak online without your permission and knowledge of their activities.

The second step towards protecting your children online is using the computer together. Siting next to your child while he or she peruses the Internet, you can guide him or her to make safe and intelligent decisions. You can approve websites and bookmark them together. You can monitor the conversations your children have with their friends and teach them appropriate online behavior at the same time. You can make recommendations and create a private time for quality time as well.

The third step involves blocking access to inappropriate areas altogether. You and your children may not always agree about what's appropriate, but as a guardian, you're in control and you're ultimately responsible for their safety. Take the time to investigate software tools that put you in control and allow you to block access to certain websites. If you use an online service like AOL (America Online), you can use its internal Parental Control settings to block access to various chatrooms and websites. You could even block instant messaging and email from anyone who isn't a fellow AOL user.

Other tools available online operate similar to the way that AOL's Parental Control settings work, however no collection of tools could replace the reinforcement of mom and dad. Never let your children speak with strangers and never leave them alone at the computer unattended. Children just don't have the experience that adults have and they don't have the skills required to handle inappropriate conversations, emails, or images found online.

NOTE: Some of these tools include kid-specific web browsers that will visit pre-

approved websites. Others include browser plug-ins that won't allow access to online areas that contain forbidden keywords.

Another step requires teaching your children to never ever volunteer personal information. Under no circumstances, should children give their personal names, home addresses, phone numbers, or school information to anyone over the Internet regardless of the situation. In the even this information is required to enter a contest of some sort, be sure that you're the one who makes the decision to supply it and that you're the one who does it.

Performing all of these steps won't be easy. However you can help minimize resistance to your monitoring efforts by explaining why you're taking these precautions. Smaller children will probably enjoy the time you spend together at the computer, but older children and pre-teens may resent it. To help build a case for your concern, you might want to show your older children a few news stories that exemplify the dangers that unsupervised children are exposed to. The newspaper is unfortunately full of examples but with your help, we can reduce them world-wide.

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