An internet safety cheat sheet for caregivers

Our kids (unlike most of us) are digital natives – meaning they will grow up surrounded by the opportunities (and challenges) that technology brings.

Today, technology is at our disposal - the Internet is accessible on every tablet and smart phone. Which means that children are online earlier than ever. And according to Pew Research, 95 percent of teenagers are online.

While most of us understand that technology can be an amazing tool for kids to learn and grow, it also comes with its own concerns.

So, we spoke with two local experts from Moline Public Library - Christina Conklin, children's services coordinator, and Lisa Powell Williams, adult services coordinator.

They understand that use of technology is a delicate balancing act. Here are their four tips to keep your kids safe and smart when using the Internet.

1. Understand the risks.

As caregivers, one of our most important jobs is keeping kids safe. That means understanding what risks come with using the Internet.

The intent isn't to scare yourself silly, but to understand how to talk to your kids and what behaviors to watch for.

Many parents fear sexual predators online, but there are other risks for Internet usage, too (like cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, revealing too much, and even identity theft).

2. Talk early.

"Conversations about Internet safety should start before kids are even online," Christina recommends. That means that before kids are asking to get Facebook, parents have already set boundaries about technology and discussed appropriate behaviors.

Many preschoolers are already adept at using tablets and computers, so don't wait to have a conversation about what's appropriate and accepted for your family.

- Determine when, where, and how long your children are allowed to use the Internet. (Many caregivers prefer kids only get online in a public area - like the living room. And consider the length of time that you want your child using a device. There are also some parental controls that allow you to control and block content.)

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- Set limits on the usage. (For younger children, a parent may choose a few apps or movies that are appropriate. As they get older, there may be a bit more freedom.)
- Discuss consequences for improper usage.
- Be patient. This isn't a one-time conversation, but something that should be discussed early and often.

3. Talk often.

"Keep the lines of communication open," Lisa explains. "Every new tool is an opportunity to reconnect with your child."

The way your child uses the Internet is going to change frequently. It may start with apps and games, move to school research and chatting, and then to social networking and other more advanced technology.

Don't wait for your child to come to you. Use everyday situations to talk to kids about being online - things like news stories about cyberbullying, school policy changes about Internet conduct, and even texting and driving.

This conversation should be ongoing throughout adolescence. And sometimes, the rules and expectations may have to change to accommodate a new tool.

As a caregiver, you know your child best. So trust your judgement and set guidelines and consequences that make sense for your child.

4. Retain access to all accounts.

As a caregiver, you make the decisions about how your child will and will not use the Internet. It's important that your son or daughter understands that, too.

This isn't always easy - especially with teens and pre-teens, who value independence and social status. But it's your call - and when they do have permission to use a tool, it's agreed that they will abide by your expectations.

Once your child is using a tool, it's also important that you can access the account. This goes for everything - email, social networks, mobile apps, forums, gaming accounts and everything else.

As a parent, it's your decision how often (if at all) you will log in to these accounts. It will depend on your child and your expectations.

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Raising a child immersed in technology can be a blessing and a curse. But it is important that we keep our kids safe - in the physical world and online.

And the first step is to learn everything you can.

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