A GUIDE TO INTERNET SAFETY FOR PARENTS

In this section you can find out practical tips for ensuring that your children are using the internet safely as well as information on the different types of technology and terminology that are currently in use

Should I be Concerned about the Internet?

While the internet undoubtedly presents fantastic opportunities for children, it is equally clear that there is a real opportunity for children to be put at risk by their exposure to material and/or individuals which may be harmful. With the rapid evolution of internet technology, through internet on mobile phones and camera phones, parents need to understand that access to the internet is becoming increasingly diverse and therefore increasingly difficult to supervise.

What can I do?

There are some simple practical steps you can take to help limit the risks as well as clear advice you can give your child. The best way of doing this is to get involved and understand how your children use the internet. Developing your knowledge of the technology involved and understanding how your child uses this technology to interact with others on the Internet will greatly assist you in guiding and supporting your children to ensure that they are using it in the safest possible manner.

Where do I start?

The best place to start is by understanding the technology that is being used by your children when they are interacting on the internet. Many parents find this immensely daunting. It is not necessary to be completely proficient in Information Technology to do this, even a basic understanding of these technologies will give you the necessary knowledge to help identify the potential risks and to ensure that you and your children can enjoy the internet in the safest possible manner?

I'm not great with the technology! OK, so what is ……?

Below is a list with very brief descriptions of some of the main types of technology being used by children today. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list, rather more of a beginners' guide.

Instant Messaging

Instant Messaging is a form of live and instantaneous communication, a mixture of chat rooms, email and phone calls, facilitated by the internet connecting PCs. It can take the form of private communication between known friends where users build up a list of their own contacts and are alerted when they are online, or it can also be a public open environment. Instant Messaging allows people to communicate via the web instantaneously over the using a variety of options including text, voice, video and pictures.

E-mail

E-mail stands for Electronic Mail and is a way of sending messages from one computer to another over the Internet. Messages are composed in special e-mail programmes.

Picture and Video-messaging

Picture and video messaging are increasingly popular forms of communications, as mobile phone devices become increasingly sophisticated. Essentially the devices allow users to forward pictures and videos in a similar manner to text messages.

Texting

Short Messaging Service (SMS) better known as texting, is the facility on your mobile phone handset which allows the user to write a text message and send this message to another number, where it will be received as a written message.

Social Networking Sites (SNS)

Social Networking areas are websites with applications which help connect friends using a number of tools like blogs, profiles, internal email systems and photos. Well known sites include Facebook and Twitter.
There are also a number of SNS specifically for young children, for example Club Penguin, Movie Star Planet etc.

Many young people use these sites to create their own profiles, which they then link to those of their friends and so on. Once set up they can use these profiles to share photographs, create blogs and post comments on other people's profiles and blogs.

Chat rooms

Because the Internet connects PCs, it allows people to "chat". There are certain websites which have chat room forums - which allow people to "post up" messages and converse with each other. Conversations are called "threads".

Surfing the Net

Most people who surf the net will do so by means of a browser, which allows you to look at internet sites. The most common browser used on PCs is Google Chrome. Other browsers include Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox.

Search Engines

Search Engines are used to assist people when surfing the net. Among the more popular search engines are Google (www.google.ie) and Yahoo (www.yahoo.com). Essentially, search engines have a search bar facility, which allows users to type in the specific information they seek. Once you do this and hit search, the search engine trawls the web seeking pages that will have the information that you are seeking, and it then gives you a list of appropriate web addresses.

Games Consoles

Games Consoles are entertainment systems designed specifically to allow users to play games. Popular versions include Sony PlayStation, Nintendo Wii and Microsoft's Xbox.

Online Games

Online Gaming relates to the process whereby users can, through the internet interact with other online users in playing games. This allows users to play games against other individuals without the need for players to be in the same location. www.pegionline.eu is an excellent site which provides information on protecting children when they are participating in online gaming.

File Sharing

File Sharing programmes allow users to swap or share files from their PCs with others over

the Internet. There are also some commercial peer-to-peer applications which allow users to buy music and video content over the Internet.

Weblogs

Weblogs, more commonly referred to as 'blogs' are usually intended for a public audience. A blog also allows for interaction with its readers through comments which can be made on the posting or other comments. Blogs differ from personal websites in that they are made up of a series of individual postings, usually published in chronological order. Generally only the manager(s) of the blog are authorised to post messages. Anyone with an internet connection can upload a comment to a posting. Access to blogs can be restricted if necessary, and comments can either be disabled or moderated by the manager of the blog. They are particularly popular with young people. Bloggers often address a narrow topic and a small, specialised audience.

OK, that's a lot to take in! So, what are the risks that I should be looking out for?

As is always the case, with each of the different types of technologies there are both positives and negatives. There is a wide range of excellent sites such as www.webwise.ie and www.thinkuknow.co.uk that provide more detailed information on the various positive and potentially negative aspects of the technology our children use on the internet today.

Broadly speaking the key areas of concern that parents should be aware of are as follows.

1. **Anonymous Nature** - Parents should be aware that by its nature the Internet allows users to retain their anonymity, particularly in the context of chat rooms and instant messaging. It's important that children are taught to understand that people they are in contact with may not be what they seem and that they should be very careful in terms of how they interact with others and what kind of information that they should disclose to others accordingly.

2. **Security Issues** - Increasingly young people are placing large amounts of personal information on the internet, whether it's through profiles on social networking sites or disclosing information in conversations in chat rooms. The disclosure of such information may leave them a t risk of the information being used by others to perpetrate fraudulent actions in their names.

3. **Cyberbullying** – parents should be aware of the potential risk of individuals using the various types of internet technology and/or materials from the internet for defamatory purposes.

Ok, with so much potential danger out there, how can I protect my children from the risks?

It is important to remember that there are many positive aspects to the internet, and that the best way forward is to proactively engage with your children in their endeavours to ensure that they are able to maximise their enjoyment of the internet in the safest possible manner.

- **Get Involved**: Learn more about what your children are doing online. Become familiar with the systems they use, if you don't know how to use them ask them to show you or teach yourself how to use them.
- **Talk to them**: Explain to them the potential dangers that exist, encourage them to talk to you if they are having difficulties or experiencing problems with other users that they may be interacting with on the Internet.
- **Set guidelines**: Set Guidelines in relation to internet usage, when it can be used, for how long, what kind of information that they should be giving out, encouraging them to treat other users with the same level of respect that they want people to show them
- **Use Available Resources**: Many of the technologies that children use today have resources that can be used to help protect children from inappropriate or obscene content. **Filtering**, **Blocking** and **Parental Control Systems** are among some of the options available.
- **Be Vigilant**: Keep computers where you can see them, keep an eye on the sites that they are visiting to ensure their suitability
- **Report!** –**Any instances of suspected online child abuse should be reported to www.hotline.ie immediately**.
- **If you are not sure if the material is illegal or not, it does not matter, report it to the Hotline and it will be assessed.**
- **The Hotline only deals with reports about content on the Internet. This service must not be used to report crime or suspected criminal activities taking place in the "real world". Any such reports should be made directly to [An Garda Síochána](#),**

either at your local Garda station or by using the free Garda Confidential telephone 1800 666 111.

Reporting to the Hotline is not a substitute for notifying An Garda Síochána. Urgent situations where persons may be in immediate danger should always be reported to An Garda Síochána directly.