# CHILDREN ONLINE

Computers have traditionally been trusted by both children and adults as reliable and accurate sources of information. The rapid growth of online services and Internet access has added a new dimension to modern computing. Through a computer modem and phone line children now have access to an almost endless supply of information and opportunity for interaction. However, there can be real risks and dangers for an unsupervised child.

Most online services give children resources such as encyclopedias, current events coverage, and access to libraries and other valuable material. They can also play games and communicate with friends. The ability to "click" from one area to another appeals to a child's natural impulsivity and curiosity and needs for immediate gratification or feedback.

Most parents teach their children not to talk with strangers, not to open the door if they are home alone, and not to give out information on the telephone to unknown callers. Most parents also monitor where their children go, who they play with, and what TV shows, books, or magazines they are exposed to. However, many parents don't realize that the same level of guidance and supervision must be provided for a child's online experience.

Parents cannot assume that their child will be protected by the supervision or regulation provided by the online services. Most "chat rooms" or "news groups" are completely unsupervised. Because of the anonymous nature of the "screen name," children who communicate with others in these areas will not know if they are "talking" with another child or a child predator pretending to be a child or teen. Unlike the mail and visitors that a parent sees a child receive at home, e-mail or "chat room" activity is not seen by parents. Unfortunately, there can be serious consequences to children who have been persuaded to give personal information, (e.g. name, passwords, phone number, address) or have agreed to meet someone in person.

**Some of the other risks or problems include:**

- Children accessing areas that are inappropriate or overwhelming;

- Online information that promotes hate, violence, and pornography;
- Children being mislead and bombarded with intense advertising;
- Children being invited to register for prizes or to join a club when they are providing personal or household information to an unknown source; and
- Hours spent online is time lost from developing real social skills.

**In order to make a child's online experience more safe and educational, parents should consider the following:**

- Limit the amount of time a child spends online and "surfing the web";
- Teach a child that talking to "screen names" in a "chat room" is the same as talking with strangers;
- Teach a child <u>never</u> to give out any personal identifying information to another individual or website online;
- Teach a child to <u>never</u> agree to actually meet someone they have met online;
- <u>Never</u> give a child credit card numbers or passwords that will enable online purchases or access to inappropriate services or sites;
- Remind a child that not everything they see or read online is true;
- Make use of the parental control features offered with your online service, or obtaining commercially available software programs, to restrict access to "chat lines," news groups, and inappropriate websites;
- Provide for an e-mail address only if a child is mature enough to manage it, and plan to periodically monitor the child's e-mail and online activity;
- Teach a child to use the same courtesy in communicating with others online as they would if speaking in person -- i.e. no vulgar or profane language, no name calling, etc.; and
- Insist that a child follow the same guidelines at other computers that they might have access to, such as those at school, libraries, or friend's homes.

Parents should remember that communicating online does not prepare children for real interpersonal relationships. Spending time with a child initially exploring an online service and periodically participating with a child in the online experience gives parents an opportunity to monitor and supervise the activity. It is also an opportunity to learn together.

Washington, D.C. 20090
http://www.aacap.org