

Keeping Your Child Safe From Harmful Content

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Keeping your child from seeing or hearing harmful content requires an active parenting style and a little knowledge about technology. The purpose of this article is to help you to pull this off. The following are recommended:

- Lock out programs or stations that contain material that may be harmful. Most cable and satellite providers allow you to do this by program rating, time of day, or station. If you are confused about how to do this call your cable or satellite provider and ask for technical support.
- Use DVRs or VCRs to record programs then fast forward through the commercials. We cannot trust that commercials will be appropriate for our children, no matter the time of day they come on.
- Control your child's access to the internet by only allowing them to use browsers that have good parent controls. Examples can be found on www.bumpercar.com, www.webwatchernow.com and www.cybersitter.com. These programs include a list of websites that they have reviewed for you (e.g., uses swear words, shows violence towards animals, etc.). You can easily program the browser to limit your child's access to websites based on what you believe is appropriate. Then if your child wants to see a website not on the list, he must come you to get permission (i.e., you enter your password allowing him to see the site). Do not allow any other kinds of browsers on a computer that your child uses.
- Do not allow your child to install applications on any computers in your home. This makes it less likely that he can secretly defeat your security measures. The system preferences on your computer will allow you to decide who is allowed to install applications. If you are unsure how to set this up just get a how-to book on your system software or ask a knowledgeable friend for a favor.
- If you have any doubts about how your child is using a computer you could install spy software (e.g., www.spector.com); such programs take pictures of how the computer is being used. I would not use this software to violate your child's privacy (e.g., to find out what she is saying about you to her friends), but only to make sure that he is not viewing harmful material or engaging in risky behaviors.
- If you discover that your child is breaking your rules and you're unsure if the controls you have in place are working, I would not allow your child to use the computer unless you can keep an eye on her. You can set up passwords on the computer, or lock them out using devices that lock onto the end of power cords (e.g., see www.familysafemedia.com).

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- Examine the list of songs on your child's electronic music player (e.g., iPod, etc.). Most of these players upload the music from a computer. For instance, iPods use the program iTunes. Within iTunes (which is installed on the machine your child attaches her iPod to) you can look to see if any songs or music videos have inappropriate content. iTunes will list the word "explicit" in a red font, in a square box, right next to the name of the song. Most of the explicit songs have a clean version.
- Be sure that your child's portable game player or cell phone does not have internet access. If it does, make sure that you can put controls on it; if you cannot, arrange to have the internet access disabled (e.g., as I write this PlayStation Portables have internet access that do not allow for parental restrictions but can be turned off all together). Also keep in mind that if your child may have online access through his gaming equipment (e.g., Xbox live, Wii, etc.), but that parent controls are usually available; if not, disconnect the internet access.

Additional guidelines and suggestions:

- Limit your child's TV watching, video game playing and goofing around on the computer to two hours a day, total. This is the good advice of the American Academy of Pediatrics; if your child is plugged in more than this she is likely missing out on other important activities (e.g., physical activity, reading, face-to-face social contact, etc.).
- Offer a skilled teenager an Amazon.com gift card to hack around your controls. Tell him you'll double the value of the gift card if he is successful and can show you how he did it.
- Of course, know the ratings of games, movies and television programming that your child is viewing and enforce your standards.
- It is your child's job to strongly object (e.g., "why don't you trust me?!" "All of my friends are allowed to have that version of the song!"). It is your job to kindly treat such complaints as spitballs bouncing off of your loving battleship. If you are not hearing these kinds of complaints, something may be wrong.
- Occasionally check in with websites that try to help you in this effort. Examples are www.tvguidelines.org, www.esrb.org/about/resources.jsp and www.netalert.gov.au. As the technology your child has access to changes these websites can help you to put effective and loving controls in place.
- Make sure that households your child visits have similar controls in place (e.g., share this article with the parents and find out if they have such controls in place or are willing to adopt them). If the parents disagree or give you a hassle, I would not let your child play there (e.g., offer to let the kids play at your house instead).

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- If you're finding it difficult to manage any of this your local child psychologist can be very helpful. You can find such a person by visiting www.psychologycanhelp.com and clicking on the Psychologist Locator.

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