

Securing the Cyber Playground



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As a parent, you cannot be everywhere at once, as much as you would like to be. Therefore you set down household rules for your children, such as don't talk to strangers, call me if you are going to be late, be home at a certain time and so on. When your children are at home, you tend not to worry as much because your home is where your children are safe - or are they? Parents now have to face the latest challenge to enter their home: the Internet.

An entire generation of children is growing up with the Internet as a regular part of their daily life. Children can use the Internet to help with school projects or to download their favourite songs. Parents worry about the television shows their children are watching, but children are now being exposed to inappropriate material everyday on their home computer. Parents realize that the Internet is a great educational tool for their children, but it also needs to be monitored. The Internet contains hundred of thousands of sites with sexually explicit, violent and hate-filled content. The use of online activity management (OAM) software can help parents control this tidal wave of inappropriate material that is entering their home.

Most Canadian parents believe that their children *always* ask for permission before submitting personal information on the Internet. Parents also believe that their children usually do Internet searches with an adult present. A report by the Canadian government, *Illegal and Offensive Content on the Internet*, reveals that this is not the case. Do you know where your children are surfing on the information highway? Can you name some of your children's favourite haunts on the Net? If the answer is no, then you are not alone. In a recent study conducted for Industry Canada¹, only 35% of parents say they know a great deal about their children's Internet use. In 1999, children between the ages of 7-14 years spent 2.4 hours a week on the Internet. By 2000, their usage had increased to 3.8 hours a week. With children spending more time on the Internet, parents are finding it more difficult to monitor their activity.

What are Canadian children doing on the Internet? In August 2000, focus groups were conducted with children between the ages of 9-16 years in the Montreal and Toronto areas. The study revealed that girls are more likely to use chat rooms or instant messaging and boys tend to use the Internet for games and downloading music.

What is the harm in these activities? The greatest fear for parents is exposure to inappropriate material, notably sexually explicit web sites. During the study, 21% of parents reported that their children had come across sexually explicit material while surfing the Internet. The question then arises, how many incidents occur of which parents are not aware? The children in the focus group felt that they were more knowledgeable about the Internet than their parents and rarely discussed web issues with

¹ Canada's Children in a Wired World: The Parent's View. March 2000.

them. The focus group also revealed that children 12 years old and up felt that they could get themselves out of any “bad sites” they encountered on the Internet.

Parents can prevent these “bad sites” from popping up on their home computers by using activity management software. This software can block web sites with sexually explicit content and sites that promote hate or violence.

Another useful feature of OAM software is the ability to block the unwanted advertising that bombards your children at almost every web site they visit. Advertisers openly admit that they target children. The teenage market has millions of dollars of buying power that companies want to exploit. In fact, the maker of a popular mini-van admitted that their advertising is aimed at children because they tend to influence parents' buying decisions. OAM software can also prevent those annoying advertising or contest windows from popping up while you are surfing.

OAM software can lock out newsgroups, chat rooms, and chat lines. The Industry Canada study reveals disturbing information for parents. The report shows that some children felt confident that they could get to know another person very quickly when chatting on-line. When asked how long it might take to feel comfortable about giving someone personal information, many children indicated that 15 minutes was enough time to get to know the person and decide if they were trustworthy! Some children did not think that giving their city or neighbourhood or even their postal code was providing identifying information. Armed with only a postal code, anyone can go to the Canada Post web site and utilize a reverse lookup for a street address range. In seconds that person can know, within a few houses, where your family lives. The *Ottawa Citizen* recently did a feature on the Internet use habits of several teenage girls. Thirteen-year-old girls disclosed that they had been approached in chat rooms and asked to engage in ‘cyber’ sex.²

Even more disturbing, the Industry Canada study reveals that many children would consider a face-to-face meeting with a person they had met on-line. Most did not feel this was dangerous behaviour. Many had parents or adult relatives who had met partners or regularly dated people that they had met on-line. Fifteen percent of parents participating in the study admitted that their children had made a new friend on-line.

OAM software is not meant to play the role of the parents; rather, its purpose is to assist parents in controlling Internet content. Protecting your children while they surf is not difficult. Here are some suggestions:

1. Become web-literate (if you are not already). If necessary, get your children to show you how!

² Pauline Tam. “*Teenage Confidential: Just because we lol as we chat on the Net doesn’t mean there’s a need for a p911 or anything, k? Chill OUT!*” *Ottawa Citizen*, 14 May 2001.

2. Establish guidelines for using the Internet and consistently enforce them.
3. Focus on the positive aspects of the Internet. Show them sites that would be of interest to them.
4. Keep your computer in a well-used area of the home, so you can be there if your child needs you.
5. Raise your children's awareness of what constitutes personal information, and caution them about giving it out.
6. Review website submissions (contest entries or other forms) before your children submit them.
7. Use Internet activity management software. This is not a replacement for parental participation, but provides extra protection.

Reliable software will have the following features:

- customizable filtering criteria
- black lists and white lists
- privacy and personal information protection
- chat room filters
- filters for ads, newsgroups, web, and malicious java script
- a list maintenance plan and regular list updates

In the past, OAM software has been criticized for over-blocking and inconsistency in blocking inappropriate material. Web sites for subjects such as breast cancer or other benign sites complain of being blocked from view. BAJAI activity management software, however, has moved beyond text-based classification. BAJAI bases its OAM tool on intelligent heuristic classifications, not personal views. The software robot, IajaBot, examines pictures, text, titles, video and link relationships to determine site classifications. Thousands of web sites are added to the Internet everyday and to combat this Iajabot visits and classifies tens of thousands of new sites a day!

The Industry Canada study revealed a discrepancy between what children are doing on the Internet and what their parents think they are doing. Parents are concerned and aware that their children are being exposed to “bad sites”. But the Internet can be reined in and parents can use Internet activity management technology to help them keep the Internet G-rated in their home.

To read the reports discussed in this article go to: <http://www.connect.gc.ca/cyberwise/> or <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/SSG/sf05376e.html>