SafeKids.Com

SafeKids.Com / SafeTeens.Com testimony before COPA Commission. June 8, 2000

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Introduction

SafeKids.Com and SafeTeens.Com were founded in September 1998 to serve a very simple function: Help kids, teens, parents, educators and law enforcement develop strategies for keeping kids safe on the Internet. Although the sites are not affiliated with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children or any other organization, some of the material contained on the sites is based on the Center's brochures, Child *Safety on the Information Highway* and *Teen Safety on the Information Highway* that were written for the Center by SafeKids.Com founder, Lawrence J. Magid. Likewise, the sites are not affiliated with GetNetWise.org, but Dr. Magid helped develop GetNetWise's safety material and both SafeKids.Com and SafeTeens.Com support and link to the GetNetWise site.

The goal of SafeKids.Com and SafeTeens.Com is not to promote any specific technologies or techniques for assuring safety but to get families to think about a variety of issues. The project maintains a separate site for teens because, though they may be minors, teens are not children. They have different risks and different needs and different strategies are needed to help them protect their own safety in cyberspace.

Speaking of differences, both sites operate on the assumption that different families have different values and need different strategies to assure their safety. Yet, there is one overriding theme that extends throughout much of the material on both sites. Parents and other caregivers are urged to help children and teens develop critical thinking skills so that they, ultimately, can protect themselves not only in cyberspace but also in off-line world. Knowing how to act defensively, avoiding dangerous places and thinking critically can serve your children well on dates, in the marketplace, in the car and in the voting booth as well as on the Internet. Rather than approach Internet safety as purely a problem, think of it as an opportunity.

SafeKids.Com has extensive information about Internet filtering software and filtered Internet Service Providers but the site does not necessarily recommend the use of such technology for all families. In some cases, filtering technology is clearly the right choice but in other situations, it may be inappropriate. Every parent must make the decision for each of his or her children. What might be a very smart move in one home could be inappropriate in another. There are even differences within families. What is appropriate for one child might not be appropriate for a sibling, even if the two children are approximately the same age.

Filters for the Brain

Regardless of whether a parent chooses to use technology to help control what a child or teen says or sees on the Internet, ultimately, the best safety filter runs not on a computer but in the young person's head. Kids and teens need to learn how to protect themselves. While close parental supervision is a must for young children and filters are appropriate in some circumstances, the child's and teen's attitude is ultimately more important.

Using an automobile safety analogy that we're all familiar with, active restraints, like seatbelts, save lives but they are useless if not deployed. Even passive restraints, like airbags, are no substitute for defensive driving   And, as appropriate as it is to hold a young child's hand when he or she crosses the street, parents must ultimately prepare their kids for the time when they must fend for themselves. The same is true on the Internet. Regardless of whether a parent uses a filter at home when a child is young, the child will -- probably sooner rather than later -- have unfiltered access to the net. It could be at school or a library or a friend's house or later in life. The child's ability to make good decisions is what will provide the best protection.

Distinguishing Safety from Social and Moral Issue

One of the most pressing needs in the arena of Internet safety is to distinguish the various issues. SafeKids.Com and SafeTeens.Com focus primarily on the issue of safety but recognize that some parents have other concerns including wanting their children's access to the net to reinforce family social and moral values. As important as these values are to many families, they should not be confused with safety. That isn't to say that such issues as access to pornography should be ignored by those of us who are concerned with children and the Internet. However, it is important to remember that "protecting" a child from deliberately accessing information that his or her caregiver considers to be age inappropriate is not the same as protecting a child from physical danger, harassment or criminal acts.

It is also important to draw a distinction between the protection of children and moral and social issues that affect adults. We respect the point of view of organizations that strive to help adults avoid or recover from obsessive use of sexually explicit material but feel that such campaigns should be kept separate and distinct from

programs to protect children. Likewise, it is important to distinguish between child pornography and children's access to pornography that is otherwise legal.

Finally, it is important to remember that some of those who prey on children are in fact, also children. Data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's "Online Victimization Study" show that 48% of the perpetuators of sexual solicitations to people between 10 and 17 are themselves under 18 and that only 4% of such solicitations are known to come from people over the age of 25. This data suggests that, in addition to educating young people to avoid becoming victims, we must also educate them to avoid victimizing others. While it may not impact physical safety, courses on "netiquette" are indeed called for. The data further shows that the Internet is a microcosm of society as a whole, suggesting that we -- as a nation -- have a larger agenda when it comes to teaching young people to be more respectful of others.

Measured Responses

One of the major goals of SafeKids.Com and, especially, SafeTeens.Com is to help parents develop appropriate responses to problems associated with the Internet. Young people should be encouraged to come to their parents if they encounter material that makes them feel uncomfortable or are solicited in inappropriate ways. Over reacting or taking away Internet privileges could prove to be counterproductive, sending the message that it's not OK to confide in your parents. To that end, we are providing resources and educational materials to help parents lend an understanding ear to kids rather than "blame the victim" when a young person brings a problem to their attention.

It is also important to realize that children have rights. It is beyond the competence of SafeKids.Com and SafeTeens.Com to adjudicate between a teenager's right to free speech and association and a parent's responsibility to govern their children's online and offline behavior. Nevertheless, as murky as these lines may be, it is important to be cognizant of the rights and responsibility of young people, especially as they approach adulthood.

Let a Thousand Safety Sites Bloom

SafeKids.Com and SafeTeens.Com do not exist in a vacuum. The sites are part of a larger community of child safety resources, each of which brings different information, resources and perspective. The two sites have numerous links to other sites with online safety information as part of a concerted effort to encourage parents to explore a variety of resources and perspectives.

Getting the Word Out

Like any other successful website, SafeKids.Com and, to a lesser extent, SafeTeens.Com take advantage of a number of promotional opportunities. Although neither site spends any funds on marketing or advertising, both enjoy widespread recognition via the media and through links from other sites.

SafeKids.Com has received extensive and ongoing media coverage in such places as CBS Television and radio, ABC News, Women's Day, Family Circle, Associated Press, CNN, FamilyPC, the Los Angeles Times, the San Jose Mercury News, USA Today, the Miami Herald and numerous other news and information outlets in the U.S. and in other countries. Also, SafeKids.Com was singled out by the producers of CBS TV's "Touched by an Angel" for an unsolicited free public service announcement that appeared on screen after an episode about dangers on the Net. SafeKids.Com has also been heavily promoted by Yahoo, Lycos and other search engines. An analysis using WebsiteGarage.com shows that SafeKids.Com has links from nearly 1,100 other sites, giving it the highest "link popularity" of any website dedicated to keeping kids safe on the Internet.

Keeping Up To Date

SafeKids.Com is updated about once a week. Appropriate safety related articles from Lawrence Magid's Los Angeles Times and San Jose Mercury news columns are regularly along with other material. What's more, SafeKids.Com, in cooperation with NetFamilyNews, sends out a weekly e-mail newsletter that covers not only Internet safety but also a wide variety of other issues of interest to families and educators.