Having "The Talk" with Your Kids

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<http://us.norton.com/the-talk/article>



What is the best way to open a discussion with your children on a complicated subject such as online safety? Can Mom and Dad "get it"? In this article, I introduce easy ways to help you start "The Talk," and keep the dialogue going with your family.

**Why "The Talk"?**

A challenge facing parents is that many of us act as if we are in denial about (or just choose to ignore), the dangers on the Internet--and just what our kids are doing and sampling online. If you are like most parents, you aren't an Internet expert or even as technically skilled as your children. That's okay. In fact, it's not necessary to be an expert in order for you to help your children enjoy the Internet safely. What you need to do is talk to your kids about what they are doing on the Internet, explain your family rules, and then keep the conversation flowing on a regular basis. Share what you do and ask what they are doing online.

I won't lie to you, getting your children to tell you, with honesty, about their Internet experiences is hard. Sixty-two percent of kids worldwide have had a negative online experience, but few tell their parents. While most parents say they talk to their kids about Internet safety, it's usually a one-time effort that includes two pieces of advice: "People online aren't always who they say they are" and "Stay away from online strangers." No wonder kids fear that telling you about their online mistakes will result in your taking away their computer, their Internet connection, and their access to friends and the rest of the world. They figure Mom and Dad just don't get it when it comes to being online.

Nevertheless, at Norton we've learned through our global research that kids want their parents to know more about the Internet. They are also more than willing to talk to their parents about the Web. That's good news.

**What You Need to Start**

So now that you know your kids are willing to talk to you, and you realize you want to learn more about what they are doing, how do you begin? How do you connect with each other in a way that allows your child to be honest? How do you avoid judging, overreacting, and panicking about what you might hear? How do you create a conversational, non-confrontational discussion that is productive enough that you can repeat the activity on a regular basis as new interests, devices, and activities arise?

I'd like to introduce a concept I call "The Talk." I'd like you to begin talking with your children about their online activities right away, and do it again, year after year. Your children's online activities keep changing. They visit different websites, try new activities, and create new social networking accounts. Yesterday everyone was talking on email; today they use the built-in messaging in social networks or text to communicate with each other. As your children get older, their need for privacy will increase at the same time the online risks they take may also increase, so it may be more of a challenge to start a dialogue later. But as the parent, it's your job to set boundaries so those risks don't destroy your child's reputation or future. Just know that those boundaries are likely to get stepped on or over, from time to time.

**Five Questions to Ask**

Below I've listed five basic questions. They should work with kids of all ages, though you can adjust the content to be age appropriate. Make sure you give your child space (physical and time) to answer you. I love having these conversations in the car--for some reason when you are both looking ahead at the road, it's easier for your child to be open with you.

**1. What are your friends doing online?**

This question directs the attention away from your child and toward the general online activities in his or her crowd. It is a good way to start, and it keeps the topic neutral and generic. You want your children to give you honest feedback, so you must reassure them you won't punish them for their answers. Your children will likely tell you about activities such as a href="/norton/library/familyresource/article.jsp?aid=fr\_onlinegaming\_addiction" target="\_blank"gaming/a, chatting, building social networks, and even doing homework or research.

**2. What are the coolest or newest websites?**

Ask your child to tell you why these sites are cool. You can also ask about the sites that aren't popular anymore and why.

**3. Would you show me your favorite sites?**

Yes, I want you to take 20 minutes out of your busy life to look at penguins sliding down a snowy hill or your child's dreadlocked warrior avatar swinging a sword around. Ask your child about using security or privacy settings (look at the top and bottom of the screen for those areas of the site). Maybe you'll be tempted to play along and set up your own account, but make sure you let your child know if you do. Ask your child how he or she uses the site and why these sites are favorites.

**4. What do you know about cyberbullying?**

Your child may not know cyberbullying by name, but he or she knows what it looks and feels like. Talk about stories you've read or seen on the news regarding nasty emails, embarrassing photos, and personal information that was shared or sent around to other kids without consent. Ask about fake social network postings or cruel online quizzes about a classmate. Find out if your child has ever heard of this stuff going on. Make sure your children know cyberbullying is incredibly common, and if they haven't seen any yet, it's only a matter of time until they do. Make sure they know how to react when it does (don't respond, save it, block it, and report it to Mom or Dad or some other adult).

**5. When you've been online, have you ever seen anything weird or that made you feel uncomfortable?**

This is an opportunity to discuss cyberbullying, accidental browsing discoveries such as porn or racist sites, or even something weird involving a friend or peer in the neighborhood. The idea is to make sure your child knows he or she can come to you and not be punished when something bad happens online. Experiencing something bad is almost inevitable when your child is active on the Internet. Make sure your child knows it is okay to go to you for help and you won't overreact.

**Extra Credit, or Questions for Families with Older Kids**

1. Do you really know everybody on your friends list?
2. Do you ever get messages from strangers? How do you handle them?
3. Do you know anyone who's gone to meet someone offline they'd been talking to online?
4. Are people in your group of friends ever mean to each other online or on phones? What do they say? Have they ever been mean to you? Would you tell me if they were?
5. Sometimes kids take nude or sexy photos and send them to others. Has that ever happened at your school?

That's it. That's "The Talk." It's not hard. It's not technical. It's totally doable, and I hope you'll give it a try. If you are a teacher, try it in a discussion with your class. And if you have any feedback for me on how this works for you in practice, let me know: marian@norton.com.