Part One

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INTERNET PARENTING STRATEGIES

Of Fenced Play Yards and Hands-On Parenting

EFFECTIVE REAL-WORLD PARENTING ONLINE

Parents already know how to raise children and teens to make safe and responsible choices. When children are younger, we keep them in safe places—such as fenced play yards—and carefully monitor their activities. We teach important safety skills and expectations for responsible behavior, especially when we are together in public places. Setting limits and imposing discipline helps to enforce these expectations.

As children grow, we allow them more freedoms, under conditions that support safe and responsible behavior. We continue to discuss behavioral expectations and impose limits. We also remain "hands-on"—asking questions such as Where are you going? What are you doing? Who are you doing it with? How long will you be gone? And, yes, sometimes we find it necessary to impose a negative consequence for failure to abide by our expectations.

Unfortunately, it is difficult for many parents to apply these real-world parenting strategies to their children and teens' use of the Internet. Even relatively Internet-savvy parents can get lost in Internet "kidzones." Parents may not even know what online dangers to watch out for, or how these dangers might appear on the Internet. Parents may believe that by installing filtering software

they have done all that is necessary to protect their children. Or they may think that Web sites are effectively "babysitting" their children. Some parents think—or their teens have convinced them—that it is necessary and appropriate to respect their children's privacy online and fail to understand that the online sites on which their children are posting material are very public and present some significant risks. Or parents may think that because their children are sitting in the family room using the computer, they are safe and all is well.

Having grown up with technology, children and teens have no fear when it comes to exploring new technologies and online activities. And they have lots more time to explore the nooks and crannies of cyberspace. Your child already is, or can be expected to become, very adept at computer technology. Children can quickly leave their parents behind in embracing emerging online technologies and activities.

As savvy as children and teens may be about the Internet, there are still many things they do not know about life and about making safe and responsible choices. Sometimes they take risks. Sometimes they fail to recognize the possible negative consequences of certain actions. There are dangerous strangers online, who might seek to seduce or manipulate your child. As a parent, you are still the "life experiences" and "risk management" expert. An effective parent-child partnership to address Internet issues is essential.

It appears, however, that many young people, especially teens, are not telling their parents or any other adults about problems or difficulties they encounter online. This includes disturbing online situations that involve sexual solicitations or cyberbullying. The disinclination to report online concerns to adults appears to reflect a concern on the part of young people that adults do not understand the teen online world, will likely overreact to any reported concern, will not know how to respond effectively to such concerns, and may make the situation worse if they do try to help. Most significantly, young people fear that if they report a disturbing online

situation to a parent or other adult, the most likely response will be to restrict their access or prevent involvement in desired online activities. As parents and other adults gain greater understanding of the teen online world and knowledge of how to respond effectively to concerns without overreacting, this can create the conditions necessary for young people to feel that it is safe to report disturbing online situations.

The same "real-world" parenting approach discussed earlier is necessary to guide children's use of the Internet. When children are younger, they are at a developmental stage during which they should use the Internet in very protected "safe places," with very simple rules. Parents essentially must keep them in safe fenced play yards online. As children grow, there comes a time when their explorations on the Internet will expand, but parents must remain by their side, holding their hand, imparting knowledge and skills, discussing safe and responsible choices, and monitoring their online activities. Eventually, older teens and young adults must have the knowledge, skills, and values to be able to consistently make good choices on their own.