Privacy Starts at Home: Teaching Minors About Online Safety

The internet provides kids and teens with an array of valuable information and educational resources, but it can also be a dangerous place for them to navigate. To protect the health and well-being of these vulnerable internet users, it’s important that parents monitor their children’s online activities and teach them basic rules for staying safe online.

Elementary School (Ages 5-10)

Start the Conversation

» Ask questions to help kids establish an understanding of computers, the capabilities of the Internet, including social media, what’s considered personal information\(^1\) and why it’s important to protect.

» Follow up by offering basic explanations and filling in the gaps in kids’ understanding.

» Help kids understand not to give out any information online (just as you would tell them not to talk to strangers).

Establish Rules:

» Define a list of appropriate websites, applications, games and other programs.

» Use parental controls to limit access, block inappropriate sites and the downloading of apps without parental consent, and double-check your online set-up with some tips from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

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\(^1\) Personal information (under the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)) means individually identifiable information about an individual collected online, including:

1. A first and last name;
2. A home or other physical address including street name and name of a city or town;
3. Online contact information as defined in this section;
4. A screen or user name where it functions in the same manner as online contact information, as defined in this section;
5. A telephone number;
6. A Social Security number;
7. A persistent identifier that can be used to recognize a user over time and across different Web sites or online services. Such persistent identifier includes, but is not limited to, a customer number held in a cookie, an Internet Protocol (IP) address, a processor or device serial number, or unique device identifier;
8. A photograph, video, or audio file where such file contains a child’s image or voice;
9. Geolocation information sufficient to identify street name and name of a city or town; or
10. Information concerning the child or the parents of that child that the operator collects online from the child and combines with an identifier described in this definition.
Monitor Usage:
» Avoid sharing passwords with kids to maintain control over what they can access and prevent accidental online purchases.
» Keep a close eye on what programs kids are using to ensure they aren’t unknowingly providing any personal information to the site.

Middle School and High School (Ages 11-18)
Continue the Dialogue:
» Maintain a dialogue about how kids access and use the Internet as they start to buy things online and use social media.
» Explain how to keep their information safe when making purchases.

Keep an Eye on Social Media:
» Establish ground rules on what information is and isn’t okay to share via social media, regardless of the site.
» Set profiles to the “private” setting, and make sure they are online friends with only the people they know.
» Disable location services in social media platforms.
» Report any suspicious pages to the FTC or other government enforcement agencies.

Teach Cell Phone Safety:
» Talk to them about not answering calls from unknown numbers, locking their phone with a password and only downloading apps from known sources.

Know Your Rights Under the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA):
The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires sites collecting personal information from children under 13 years old to obtain ‘verifiable parental consent’ prior to collection of the information. Become familiar with this concept and understand your rights as a parent.

For More Information Contact VA Privacy Service
Privacy Hotline: 202-273-5070
Email VA Privacy Service
VA Privacy Service Website