

## Protect Your Kids and Computer Online: First Steps

*Ted McLaughlan - August 2005*

I'm a Dad. This means I'm in charge of things that need fixing, like the barbecue grill and the home computer. I don't like to fix these things. However, both are fraught with safety issues, especially to the kids, and are equally important to my family. The computer, however, is a far more unrepentant and destructive entity if misused or ignored, especially to children (and your wallet!).

Following is a summary of information and actions I've found immediately necessary to protect our family computers, protect our children when using them, and generally overcome the little headaches without introducing big ones. This is no nonsense, frank, get r' done advice. I could spend hundreds of hours and pages discussing and reviewing all the issues with children online, but I won't and can't; the baby needs changing, the dog needs feeding and the barbecue needs new innards.

Here's the context; if you're like me, do what I do. Although my career is actually with computers and data security, I don't want to bring work home with me, become a 'home computer administrator', or even claim the computer as a hobby. It's a dumb, stupid machine that's useful some of the time, and too much overhead much of the time (like the Dog). But the kids absolutely need to know how to use it.

As a casual home computer user and father of four, I don't want:

- to take out my credit card, or even know its number
- to use any personally identifiable information at all, or know it
- to download anything big
- anything with over religious, cultural or political overtones
- to play around with settings, configurations, registries too much
- to have a checklist of things to do every day
- too many userids, passwords
- any commercials or advertisements, whether pop-ups, -unders, -sideways or total hijacks
- too many options to select or customize
- to build a whole custom list of offensive/restricted words, phrases, site names
- my casual use impacted in any way
- to mess up my computer, so I have to call the Geek Squad
- to fill in any forms, surveys
- to read through any "disclaimers", or "user agreements"
- to join user groups, forums, communities, boards
- to be contacted online or by phone for anything
- to do any weird programming, 'host file' control, IP address manipulation, or other geek stuff
- to deal with encryption of any kind
- to hide things in secret places that I'll forget
- to 'page down' or 'next page' more than once
- to be an 'administrator'
- to 'optimize' or 'upgrade' anything
- to digest a whole bunch of 'tips' and 'tricks'

Perhaps I'm lazy, introverted or simply want to know the computer only as an appliance. Perhaps these self-centered needs are dirty little secrets of all computer users.

Things I do want for me and the kids using it include:

- interesting, helpful information, not the musings of Doctor Demento
- current information, not last year's
- answers, not more discussion and research
- the darn thing to just keep working, and fast
- commoditization of the whole mess, i.e., really plug it in and do almost nothing till it breaks
- provision of all the things I don't want (above)

So, here's what to do, organized by a few categories. Save yourself time, money, hassle and an appearance on Oprah, after your kids open their own online casino. This advice is targeted strictly for non-computer savvy parents with children under 10 in the house. No Apple advice here, and this is focused on use of Microsoft's Internet Explorer. More detailed and refined advice will come in further versions of this document, as the kids grow, our computer dies, and the Internet wasteland gets closer to home. There's lots more information and war stories available about the "why's" and "how's" of the following points; send an email to [whizkidsllc@hotmail.com](mailto:whizkidsllc@hotmail.com) with questions. Items in **BOLD** are bare minimum.

### **Straightforward Computer Protection for Kids**

#### Turn it off

- **you can turn it off, if it bothers you, so just do it (just like the TV and Gamecube) – even hide the power cord!**

#### Talk to Your Children

- **tell them exactly what they can and can't do, and why ("stranger danger" and "daddy's stuff")**
- **if they don't follow the rules, they don't use the computer**
- the computer (for them) is for educational games, help with school (other use isn't necessary under 10)
- if they're unsure, uncomfortable or just plain annoyed with things they see, ask you first before 'experimenting' or clicking around on stuff

#### Hardware, Placement and Usage

- **put it in a central place, like the family room; computers don't belong in their rooms**
- **they shouldn't be using it unless you know they are**
- **if using a wireless network, turn off your SSID broadcast** (and name it something anonymous, like 'nothinghere'), and don't worry about encryption; if you can figure it out, limiting access to your own PC's MAC addresses is a nice control
- turn the volume off or way down; even with games, it's just annoying
- set screensaver to turn on only after several hours
- don't use fancy keyboards and mice, just cheap ones; no wireless peripherals
- buy cheap computers; they really are appliances now
- get a nice multi-CD/DVD holder, and make sure they use it (avoid the scratches!)
- wrap and protect the cabling/power cords from little hands
- stow away the computing unit and peripheral drives, if possible – only expose the monitor
- no food or drink near the computer, and stop touching everything with sticky hands (wipes nearby are good)
- you don't need a TV tuner in the kid's computer
- they don't need to print anything; you can do it, and save both a tree and your printer cartridge
- use a surge protector

## Protect Your Family's Privacy

- **your child shouldn't type in their phone number, address, age or full name anywhere, ever (you can do it, if necessary)**
- even if entry/purchase/login forms ask for or require name, address and telephone, try entering all bogus info, except for your first name and email address
- use anonymous email and IM addresses if possible (like 'Ted01' vs. 'tedmclaughlan')
- don't post picture of your kids (unless on a password-protected site)
- set your IE's "Privacy" settings to at least "Medium", if not "High"; you can always reset if too annoying

## Protect Your Software, Data and Configurations

- **your kids shouldn't upload or download anything, without your help and permission**
- **Anti-virus software; buy, install and make sure it's turned on - now!**
- **Copy all your 'stuff', especially if its in a place you know (like 'My Documents'), onto a CD once in a while (i.e. 'Backups') - you might want it actually stored in a directory that's not named "my personal secret stuff"**
- lock your browser toolbars
- at least use a password for the computer's primary userid, if not actually setting up multiple ids (one for you, one for your kids, with much more limited access)
- turn on the Microsoft Internet Explorer firewall (it's pretty easy, look it up on Google)
- Clean up your computer once every couple of months (you really should do this, otherwise the computer will grind to a halt with lots of Internet usage)
  - **Run at least 2 different 'scumware' or 'adware' programs, like Spybot and Adaware (they're pretty cheap)- let the software do its job, and remove everything it sees**
  - In Internet Explorer, under 'tools', 'internet options' - see the 'temporary Internet files', and press the 'delete cookies', and 'delete files' buttons - including the 'delete offline content' option under 'delete files'.
  - If your sort of computer saavy, you might try an automated registry cleanup program, like Registry First Aid - be careful with this, but it's pretty straightforward
  - Run the computer's system accessories called 'Disk Defragmentor' and 'Disk Cleanup'
  - Use and run the automatic Microsoft Windows update feature (<http://update.microsoft.com/windowsupdate/v6/default.aspx?ln=en-us>)

## Surf n' Search Safe

- **kids shouldn't ever click any buttons that say 'open', 'download', 'load', etc., and should never click anywhere inside any frame that 'pops up' (regardless of the game, contest, whatever). Just click the red 'x' on the top right.**
- Use "pop-up blockers", like that provided with the Google Toolbar
- Use kid safe sites and search engines (things like in Google, use 'safesearch', or <http://www.awesomelibrary.com> and [www.ajkids.com](http://www.ajkids.com))
- Use the "Content Advisor" feature of IE, with all settings "High"; you can always reset if too annoying - this feature has all kinds of capabilities, including blocking specific sites
- Set the IE "Security" setting to at least "Medium", if not "High"; you can always reset if too annoying
- Use Internet Filters (you can buy programs, like NetNanny - I haven't yet done this, because all the other things mentioned in this article seem to suffice for now); here's a review: "[http://www.child-internet-safety.com/internet\\_filters.php](http://www.child-internet-safety.com/internet_filters.php)"
- If you do all the things in this article, you really don't need to use software that records websites visited, keystrokes, etc. - although there are lots of these kinds of tools out there
- If you need to be poking around less-than-savory Internet destinations, do it on a different computer - there are, however, many easy ways to 'cover your tracks', so to speak; ask Google

## Communicating Online

- **Don't let them do it, or show them how, unless completely under your supervision**

- Know their slang (they use funny abbreviations, like those described at <http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/children/kidtalk.mspx>)
- If they must use email, look for child-safe email programs, or open a disposable, anonymous account on something with good spam filters, like yahoo or hotmail.

### Online Resources – lots of stuff to read, if you’ve got time

- <http://www.netsmartz.org/safety/safetytips.htm>
- <http://www.afafilter.com/ist.asp?tips=yes>
- <http://kids.getnetwise.org/>
- <http://www.safekids.com/>
- <http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/children/default.mspx>
- [http://www.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/Child\\_Safety/](http://www.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/Child_Safety/)

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