



Safe Surfing on the World Wide Web

Russell A. Sabella, Ph.D.

Parts excerpted from Sabella, R.A. (2003). *SchoolCounselor.com: A friendly and practical guide to the world wide web* (2nd edition). Minneapolis, MN: Educational Media Corporation.

© 2004, All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Dr. Russell A. Sabella is currently Associate Professor of counseling in the College of Education, Florida Gulf Coast University and President of the American School Counselor Association (2003-2004). He can be reached via email at rsabella@fgcu.edu.

The World Wide Web's power as a medium for communication, collaboration, service delivery, electronic transfer, etc., lies in its ability to transcend limitations of space and time. Many of today's school counselors enjoy the advantages of conducting many of these types of tasks on the Web more accurately and efficiently than ever before imagined. With this power, however, comes an important responsibility to use the Web in a manner which is safe, secure, ethical, and contributes to the overall welfare of all involved, especially our students.

Decreasing Student Risk

There exists no guarantee that young students will not somehow access inappropriate, illegal, or obscene material over the Web. However, there are methods which schools (and parents) can employ to significantly decrease the danger and risk to such access among our children. Following are several suggestions which can be implemented in schools and sometimes at home.

Supervision. "Hold hands while crossing the street" is good advice in reality and makes perfect sense on the Internet too. Adult supervision is a method for shielding our children from adult material more effective than the most advanced technology yet developed for this purpose. There exists no substitute for sitting down with your students or children and exploring the World Wide Web together. This is true when surfing for leisure, doing homework, or conducting counseling related activities. Similar to watching television together, adults and children whom surf the Web together share an experience which can prove to be beneficial to the relationship. Further, the Web provides much opportunity for discussing scores of topics and issues favorable for learning. Besides, if a student or class in your custody accesses pornographic material on the Web because you were not appropriately supervising, you may place yourself and your school at legal risk and consequently endanger your career.

[Return to VSCA Newsletter Index](#)

Realistically however, when a group of student simultaneously access the Web, controlling which sites they enter is very difficult at best if not humanly possible. Therefore, adequately protecting students from harmful material requires both human and technological assistance. Parents and community stakeholders can help supervise and even conduct lab exercises when using the Web. Additionally, schools can incorporate hardware and software solutions for filtering and blocking (discussed later) potentially obscene materials from entering the school's walls.

Acceptable Use Policies (AUP). With Internet access becoming increasingly common within our schools, it is apparent that a clear set of guidelines for the use of the resources that this access provides are needed for the guidance of the students, teachers, administrators, parents, and board members. Using the Internet such as with classroom guidance can be somewhat risky. It is advisable to obtain consent forms from all parents at the beginning of the school year emphasizing that, while all efforts will be directed toward seeing that children access appropriate material, common sense dictates that no monitoring system is foolproof, and in the final analysis students must also assume responsibility for accessing only appropriate material. An Acceptable Use Policy is a document which establishes parameters for those who use the Internet at school. The document addresses appropriate use of the school's system, the rights of all parties involved, protocols and procedures for infractions, and liabilities such as in the case of loss or damage. For an AUP template, you may visit <http://education.otago.ac.nz/NZLNet/safety/aup.html>. Also, check out HISD's Armadillo -- The Texas Studies Gopher (<http://chico.rice.edu/armadillo/Rice/Resources/acceptable.html>) which began collecting AUP resources a number of years ago and should prove to be helpful as a starting place.

According to Willard (1996), some school districts have established a policy of having a "sponsoring teacher" sign a student's Internet use agreement affirming that they will supervise the student's use of the account. The practical reality is that the sponsoring teacher of a secondary school student will not be in always be in a position to monitor an individual student's activities, therefore it is unclear what why such a signature is required. Sponsoring teachers will be directly in the firing line if a parent is displeased with their child's actions on the Internet. All district personnel should have general supervisory responsibility when their students are using the Internet. Counselors might be well advised to follow Willard's (1996) advice to teachers:

My advice to teachers is that they should not sign any agreement that places responsibility on them for supervising specific students in their use of the Internet. A signature indicating specific responsibility is an invitation to trouble, including the potential of being listed as a defendant in a law suit. While it is unlikely that a teacher would be held personally responsible, being a defendant in a law suit does not rank high on anyone's list of fun and games. p. 10

Provide Students with Knowledge. Self-defense is more than just common sense on the Web. Of course, all the rules in the real world also hold true in cyberspace. That is, don't talk to strangers, don't give out your personal

[Return to VSCA Newsletter Index](#)

information, and watch where you're going. However, the Internet is pervaded by savvy and cunning users who can obtain information such as your system origin (e.g., visit <http://www.whatismyip.com/>) and use this to decipher your personal e-mail address, find your home address and instantly create a map to your house (e.g., see <http://www.anywho.com>). This information can be gathered infinitely more quickly than in real life.

Although children should always ideally be supervised when online, they should also follow some "rules of the road" which should lead to having a better time in cyberspace, stay safe, and keep you and their parents worrying less. The following is an example of a "contract" that your students should read, understand, and follow (Magid, 1996; available as printable bookmarks at <http://www.franklin.k12.wi.us/Pages/Programs/Registration%20Forms/My%20Rules%20for%20Online%20Safety.pdf>).

- I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parents' work address/telephone number, or the name and location of my school without my parents' permission.
- I will tell my parents right away if I come across any information that makes me feel uncomfortable.
- I will never agree to get together with someone I "meet" online without first checking with my parents. If my parents agree to the meeting, I will be sure that it is in a public place and bring my mother or father along.
- I will never send a person my picture or anything else without first checking with my parents.
- I will not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel uncomfortable. It is not my fault if I get a message like that. If I do I will tell my parents right away so that they can contact the service provider.
- I will talk with my parents so that we can set up rules for going online. We will decide upon the time of day that I can be online, the length of time I can be online, and appropriate areas for me to visit.
- I will not access other areas or break these rules without their permission.

Blocking and Filtering Software

Software solutions to preventing access to harmful material falls into two general classes. Solutions that (a) block net access to certain addresses deemed to contain objectionable material (i.e., blocking); and (b) block access based on the appearance of certain words or phrases in the data being downloaded (filtering).

Caution is still recommended as neither of these approaches is foolproof. One can never know all sites which might contain objectionable material, and monitoring based on the occurrence of certain words or phrases might easily screen out daily newspapers or even the Bible. For instance, typical sites mistakenly blocked by

[Return to VSCA Newsletter Index](#)

word filters may include chicken recipe sites, blocked for the word "breast," the White House Web site, blocked for the word "couple," and a county government site blocked for the phrase "Middlesex County." On the other hand, a word filter will frequently allow a picture from a pornographic site to appear in the browser before triggering a block. This is because many porn sites purposely represent all the "words" in the opening page in the form of graphics in order to defeat any word filter. And, of course, once a picture is on the computer screen it can be saved, printed, e-mailed, or posted just about anywhere else on the Net. Willard (1996) also points out that using screening software is expensive and might take resources that could better be used to provide training and support for teachers, counselors, students, and parents. She also indicates that such software places a reliance on barriers, instead of a focus on assisting students to make appropriate choices guided by school rules and personal values.

Several blocking/filtering software resources include:

- ~ Since children of all ages use America On Line (AOL), the company has created features to help parents make sure their children have a fun and enriching experience online, while limiting access to some features of AOL and the Internet. These Parental Controls allow parents to designate different levels of access for each child. <http://www.aol.com>. Also, MSN has a fully featured parental control as well (<http://www.msn.com>).
- ~ Bess filtering software works with a wide variety of implementations to meet the needs of schools and libraries. Whichever device you prefer, every Bess product uses the categorized filtering database recognized as the most effective available. (http://www.n2h2.com/products/bess_home.php)
- ~ Cyber Patrol is used to manage Internet access, limit the total time spent online and restrict access to Internet sites that you deem inappropriate. <http://www.cyberpatrol.com>
- ~ Cyber Sentinel allows user to block inappropriate material (web pages, e-mail, pictures, and word processing documents) no matter what format it is in, or what it is. It also allows the owner to configure the program to run in stealth mode (so the end user doesn't know it is running). The owner can then run Cyber Sentinel later and see screen shots of when the user was viewing inappropriate material. <http://www.securitysoft.com/>
- ~ CyberSitter is an award winning filtering software which I personally use in my home. <http://www.cybersitter.com>
- ~ Pearl Software, Inc. provides network-enabled Internet monitoring software to schools, colleges, universities and libraries. Their focus is to provide teachers, administrators and librarians with a realistic means to supervise and educate students in a dynamic world of interactive Internet communications. <http://www.pearlsw.com/>
- ~ FamilyConnect Blocks 15 different categories, including pornography, file sharing, chat and illegal activity (drugs, bombs, hacking, etc.). <http://www.familyconnect.com>

[Return to VSCA Newsletter Index](#)

Net Nanny allows you to monitor, screen and block access to anything residing on, or running in your PC, whether you are connected to the Internet or not, and in real time. <http://www.netnanny.com>

SafeSurf is an organization dedicated to making the Internet safe for your children without censorship. They are developing and are implementing an Internet Rating Standard that is bringing together parents, providers, publishers, developers, and all the resources available on the Internet to achieve this goal. It involves marking sites with the SafeSurf Wave. <http://www.safesurf.com/>

Child/Family Friendly Internet Service Providers

Some Internet Service Providers (e.g., <http://www.integrityonline.com> and <http://www.cleanweb.net>) have automatic controls of content, both web and email, before it is even allowed to enter your computer. Given hundreds or thousands of dial-up numbers, you can enjoy filtered web surfing and email correspondence from throughout the country. When using a filtered ISP, you typically do not have to worry about keeping your filtering or blocking software updated because the filtering occurs at the ISP level, not at your computer.

In summary, the Web, like any tool, is either helpful or harmful depending on the user's purpose, capability, and actions. Focusing on parts that are helpful and avoiding those that are hurtful can be a somewhat difficult task because of the vast and morphological nature of the Web. Appropriate discovery and learning, as well as overall well-being while using the Web, is best achieved by a combination of educated adults, clear and pervasive policies, technological solutions such as filters, and knowledgeable end users or students.

References

Magid, L. (1996). Yahoo!igans Rules for Online Safety. Available online: <http://www.yahooligans.com>.

Willard, N. (1996). A legal and educational analysis of k-12 internet acceptable use policies. Available online: http://www.erehwon.com/k12aup/legal_analysis.html.

Safety & Security Related Websites

A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety from the FBI

<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguide.htm>

This guide, available in both English and Spanish, helps you to begin to understand the complexities of on-line child exploitation.

CyberNetiquette Comix

<http://disney.go.com/cybersafety/>

An entertaining, interactive way for families to learn valuable lessons about online safety. Join classic Disney characters for adventure, fun, and online awareness tips. This site encourages parents and children to enjoy and discuss these interactive fables together.

[Return to VSCA Newsletter Index](#)

Family Education.com

<http://www.familyeducation.com/article/0,1120,1-4561-1,00.html>

An article entitled *Email Safety: Keeping the Kids Safe*

GetNetWise.org

<http://www.getnetwise.org>

Hosted by Internet Industry Corporations & Public Service Organizations, this is a large, excellent resource. Their safety guides are grouped by age from 2-17 years-old.

Internet Safety Awareness

<http://www.internet-safety.org>

Internet-Safety.org provides information to the public about various online safety issues, including crime prevention, fraud awareness, hacking, and the law.

Internet Safety Resources

http://www.vachss.com/help_text/internet_safety.html

Quite comprehensive!

Microsoft's Guide to Internet Safety

<http://www.microsoft.com/info/safeonlinedefault.htm>

This site provides educational resources for safe use of the Internet that are available in the online world.

Mid-continent Research for Education & Learning (MCREL)

<http://www.mcrel.org/products/tech/technology/safety.asp>

Lots of helpful and useful links to articles, reports, and guides on internet safety including sample Internet Use Policies, information about blocking and filterings software, and much more.

Parent's Internet Guide

<http://www.nassaulibrary.org/parent/guide.pdf>

Learn how to keep your children safe. Includes "discussion starters" to help you talk to your kids about online safety. This booklet was written by the Nassau Library System's Technology Committee and is available online. You will need Adobe Acrobat Reader to access it.

Safe Surfin' Kids and Teens

<http://www.safesurfin.com/kids.htm>

Some of your favorite celebrities are here to give you tips on how to be smart - and safe - when you surf the 'Net. This site provides tips and an online Driver's Ed Challenge so that you may get your Internet Driver's License!

Safekids.com

<http://www.safekids.com>

Safekids.com is probably the most respected online safety site. The creator, Larry Magid wrote "Child Safety on the Information Highway" for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. That article is available here as well as a wealth of other useful and timely information.

SmartParent.com

<http://www.smartparent.com/>

[Return to VSCA Newsletter Index](#)

SmartParent.com is a resource dedicated to educating parents on the best ways to safeguard their children from the dangers presented by cyberspace.

Teen Safety on the Information Highway by Lawrence J. Magid

<http://www.safekids.com/safeteens/safeteens.htm>

A well-written article about this issue.

U.S. Department of Education Internet Safety Page

www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/internet

Several helpful links and downloadable guides.

Yahooligans! Parents' Guide

<http://www.yahooligans.com/parents/>

Yahooligans! an internet search engine for children, offers information in three different areas; surfing as a family, safe online communications and avoiding inappropriate material.

[Return to VSCA Newsletter Index](#)