



Today, kids don't just 'go online' - they live online, thanks to social media, online schoolwork, video games, YouTube, and countless online communities that are geared towards younger audiences. This month we spoke with Kathy Gust, Program Director for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Buffalo Office, to discuss when, how and why parents should get involved in guiding their children's internet use.

## When should you start talking about internet safety with your children?

"Today, one-year-olds are playing on their parents' i-pads and many kids' play experiences are moving online. So we at the Center believe that parents need to start talking to kids about internet safety from a very young age," Gust explains. This is important because young children need to be aware of netiquette (not being rude or mean online), cyberbullying, and the risks of making 'friends' online.

But it's also important because these conversations set a precedent for discussions around internet safety in the future. Parents who start early can normalize internet safety for their children and preempt the pushback that they may receive if introducing the topic when their kids are older. They also may be making their job easier. Gust, who speaks with many parents in the community, advises that "parents

who wait until their children are older are often uncomfortable with bringing these topics up."

## What should you say to your children about online risks?

There are many ways that you can broach the conversation of internet safety in a way that feels supportive, not accusatory.

### 1. Know your audience.

Especially if you are speaking with younger children, make sure the conversation is age appropriate. Kids shouldn't be afraid of using the internet or think there is always someone trying to harm them. "You can frame it through honesty," Gust says. "Tell them that they may be honest online, but that not everyone is." As kids grow up, you can be more blunt about the dangers they face.

### 2. Get kids involved.

If you begin by asking your children what they are using and why, they may interpret your tone as accusatory and shut down or become defensive. However, if you begin by asking their advice—"I'm not sure what kids are using now. Can you show me how to use some of these apps?"—you may be surprised how forthcoming they are actually are. "Tell your child, 'let's talk about how we can keep you safe,'" Gust advises. "This may help them feel invested in thinking about their safety online, and it will definitely give you a better understanding of what they're using on a daily basis."

### 3. Don't be afraid to limit or control online usage.

At the end of the day, you want to protect your child, and that requires being knowledgeable about what apps your child is using and having the power to limit or determine their online activities. "Look at your child's device and see what's on it," Gust recommends. "Kids can be naïve and trusting, and they often don't see the danger in risky online behaviors like cyber-bullying or viewing inappropriate content. Whether that means you always have the password to their phone or whether you limit or track certain online activities, don't be afraid to assert your right as a parent to protect them."

For more information on internet safety and resources for parents, visit:

<http://www.netSMARTZ.org/Home>