Online safety

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Just like any social interaction, there are ways to use the internet for good, and ways to use it for ill.

The internet has opened up new horizons for people to explore, and new places for them to gather and engage with each other. It's easy sometimes to think that we are different people when we are online, and that we can behave in different ways than we would in the real world.

But the things that we believe are right and wrong in the real world should also guide our behaviour online.

In 2008, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference released a pastoral letter on internet safety, affirming the positive possibilities the internet offers while also highlighting some of the dangers for families.

Some of the issues highlighted were the risk of exposure to material which is pornographic, violent or offensive; stranger danger; the risk of financial exploitation; and cyberbullying.

Students and their parents can make decisions about how they behave online to limit the likelihood of having a harmful experience.

FOR STUDENTS

Protect your privacy – never give your real name or other personal details to anyone you meet online, keep passwords and login details secret, and ensure your social network profiles are set to private.

Choose wisely who you ‘friend’ – you don’t have to ‘friend’ or chat with strangers.

Think before posting – don’t say anything online which you wouldn’t say in person. Treat others as you would like to be treated online.

Don’t open messages from people you don’t know – they may contain rude or inappropriate material or even computer viruses.

If you are upset by language or pictures you receive online – don’t respond. Tell an adult. It is ok to speak up if you think something is inappropriate.

Take time out – take a break and get out, leave the phone and computer at home.

FOR PARENTS

Establish rules around the use of the internet – talk openly about the benefits and risks with your children.

Familiarise yourself with any social media your children may use – such as Facebook and Myspace. Consider joining in to gain an insight.

Keep technology out in the open – where possible keep internet access in a family area of the home, also encourage wireless laptops to be used in family areas.

If your child or teenager reports being cyber-bullied or inappropriate contact with a stranger – take them seriously. Investigate calmly, as some misunderstandings do occur when communicating online. Where necessary, follow-up with the website provider or your school principal or report to the police.

Encourage children to take regular breaks from using online technology – a recent study found keeping children active away from the computer for at least 30 minutes a day was one of the keys to cultivating a healthy and safe relationship with the internet.

USEFUL RELATED WEBSITES

www.cybersmart.gov.au
www.schoo.ls.nsw.edu.au/click
www.cyberbullyingforum.org