
From: Todd Elgie
Sent: Wednesday, December 21, 2005 9:06 PM
Subject: Are your kids safe?

(This e-mail is four pages printed)

Hello parents,

I'm the IT Director at CCCS, and the issues I mention in this email have been on my heart for some months now. I am scared. I hope you are scared too after you visit the links in this e-mail.

You want your children to be safe. To that end, you may have a security system on your house. You probably also make your children wear seat belts, and when they were little you had them sitting in child safety seats. You might even make them wear a helmet when riding their bikes. (How did we all ever survive! lol)

But what scares me is that you unknowingly may be letting pedophiles and sexual predators into your homes--even into your kids bedrooms--through the Internet.

I am not exaggerating. Six months ago I might have thought so...but what I have seen and learned in the last month convinces me children are in danger. If I did not inform all of you in this manner, I feel I would be acting irresponsibly with the knowledge I have been given.

Do you have filtering or monitoring software on all the computers your kids use?

Do your kids use the computer in their bedroom or another place where you can't easily monitor them?

Are your kids allowed to use the Internet at a friend's house? Are they monitored there?

Do you know if your kids have posted pictures of themselves online?

Do your kids have a blog? Are they a part of a social networking site? Do you know what personally identifiable information they have posted?

If you don't read any further, then do this:

1. Get filtering software (if you have elementary aged kids) and logging software (if you have middle school and high school age kids). (see below)
2. Do not let your kids access the Internet anywhere where there is not a filter or they are not monitored by a responsible adult.
3. If you have junior or high school aged kids, find out now if they have a blog or are a member of a social networking site (Xanga, MySpace) and see if what they have posted puts them in danger of being targeted/exploited by an Internet predator.
4. If your kids have cell phones, find out what kinds of pictures and messages they are sending and receiving.
5. Learn to use the computer, learn about the dangers of the Internet, communicate with your children, and communicate with other parents.

Now for some statistics....

<http://www.netsmartz.org/safety/statistics.htm>

Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth

Out of a nationally representative sample of 1,501 youth ages 10 to 17 who use the Internet regularly, it was found that:

Approximately one in five received a sexual solicitation or approach over the Internet in the last year. (One in thirty-three received an aggressive sexual solicitation — a solicitor who asked to meet them somewhere; called them on the telephone; sent them regular mail, money, or gifts.)

One in four had an unwanted exposure to pictures of naked people or people having sex in the last year.

One in seventeen was threatened or harassed.

Three quarters of youth who encountered a sexual solicitation or approach did not tell a parent.
(emphasis added)

In households with home Internet access, *two thirds of parents said they did not have filtering or blocking software* on their computer at the time they were interviewed.

Internet Safety Seminar

In August 2005 CCCS hosted an Internet Safety seminar presented by Sgt. Gary Spurger (PCT 4) who is in the technology crimes division of the Harris County Sherriff's Office. He graciously gave me his resources, and in October I used the material (where age-appropriate) in our school chapels.

I had intended to schedule more safety presentations for parents, but now believe it is better to get you to the information in this format. You may then use and refer to it as needed.

This link includes all of the content of the chapel presentations and more:

<http://www.netsmartz.org/resources/nsresources.htm>

Recommended vignettes/stories are

"Webville Outlaws"

"Meet the WizzyWigs"

"Tracking Teresa"

Please view the resources there and look at the Internet Safety Pledges which can be found here:

<http://www.netsmartz.org/resources/pledge.htm>

Take a look at the material and watch/do it with your children. Let them know you are serious about their safety online.

Blogs, Xanga and MySpace

Blog: A blog is a website for which an individual or a group generates text, photographs, video, audio files, and/or links, typically but not always on a daily or otherwise regular basis. The term is a shortened form of weblog.

Xanga and now MySpace are two of the more popular blogging/social networking sites of secondary students at CCCS (livejournal.com is used by some students, and increasingly Yahoo!360).

These sites allow students to create a profile, list their demographic information and interests, post what's on their mind, and allow others link to them as "friends" and to comment/react to their posts and pictures.

In late 2004 I noticed from server logs that a few CCCS students were blogging, primarily on the web site Xanga. The number of CCCS students "hanging out" online has grown since then, most of them having moved over to MySpace. I would say at least a third of our students have a site at Xanga or MySpace. These sites have been blocked on campus since early November.

If you have children in middle school or high school, make them show you their MySpace or Xanga if they have one (if they balk... well, who is in charge? them or you?) Check and see who is linking to their site and check the pictures posted as well. (Many are posting pictures using their phones.) You might want to set up your own Xanga or MySpace and lurk (which I have done). **Do searches for CCCS or Cypress Christian and see what you discover.** All you have to find is one CCCS student and their links and links from there will eventually lead you to all the other CCCS students (and thousands of students in NW Houston).

Work out blogging and social networking website standards for your children which you can enforce and they can abide by. Not all kids are going to get into this new form of expression and communicating, but some will. If your kids are younger, stay informed and be planning how your family will handle new communication technologies.

Links:

<http://www.xanga.com>

<http://www.myspace.com>

<http://www.livejournal.com>

Articles to Read

Please read the following articles. If the New York Times article requires you to log in to read it, use "cccsparent" as the username and "warriors" as the password. **WARNING: The NYT article is very graphic and is NOT for children or young teens.**)

MSNBC: Kids, blogs and too much information

Children reveal more online than parents know

<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/7668788/>

NYT: Through His Webcam, a Boy Joins a Sordid Online World

[http://news.google.com/url?sa=t&ct=us/0-](http://news.google.com/url?sa=t&ct=us/0-2&fp=43aa2df73ad0f857&ei=gwCqQ42Al7ukaanSqdeO&url=http%3A//www.nytimes.com/2005/12/19/national/19kids.ready.html%3Fhp%26ex%3D1134968400%26en%3De17dd0c0b85cdde4%26ei%3D5094%26partner%3Dhomepage&cid=1103030795)

[2&fp=43aa2df73ad0f857&ei=gwCqQ42Al7ukaanSqdeO&url=http%3A//www.nytimes.com/2005/12/19/national/19kids.ready.html%3Fhp%26ex%3D1134968400%26en%3De17dd0c0b85cdde4%26ei%3D5094%26partner%3Dhomepage&cid=1103030795](http://news.google.com/url?sa=t&ct=us/0-2&fp=43aa2df73ad0f857&ei=gwCqQ42Al7ukaanSqdeO&url=http%3A//www.nytimes.com/2005/12/19/national/19kids.ready.html%3Fhp%26ex%3D1134968400%26en%3De17dd0c0b85cdde4%26ei%3D5094%26partner%3Dhomepage&cid=1103030795)

Accompanying diagram for the NYT article:

http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2005/12/19/national/19kids_graphic_2lg.gif

(There are four more articles in the NYT report. Please read them.)

Instant Messaging

If your children are using Instant Messaging (AIM/MSN/Yahoo! Messenger/Google Talk), are you sure that everyone in your child's buddy/friends list is who they say they are? Instant messaging (and chat rooms) is one way Internet predators select and "groom" their victims. We've all seen reports on the news of teens running away with adults they meet online. Also be aware that even if they are not at a computer, they can IM via most mobile phones.

Filtering/Logging

Filtering software allows or denies access to web sites, either based on lists of approved/blocked sites, or based on the content of the individual page.

Logging software records web sites visited, chat conversations, words typed on the screen, and may take pictures of the screen.

I recommend filtering for families with younger children, and logging AND filtering software for families with older children.

Logging is more important than filtering for older students because instant messaging and e-mail are where the action is. If your teen is online for any length of time, but you are not logging their IM conversations and e-mail, you really don't know who they are talking to and who is talking to them.

Sgt. Spurger related an incident where a high school student had been talking via instant messaging to a boy from her high school. He became more rude and mean and eventually started threatening her. Her parents called the police, and Officer Spurger and his team were able to trace the conversations back to a 26 year old man - he was not a high school student at all!

Filtering software:

<http://www.afafilter.com>

<http://www.cybersitter.com>

<http://www.netnanny.com>

(your ISP may have filtering options available as well)

Logging:

<http://www.eblaster.com>

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

Note that logging software will probably be flagged as spyware or a virus-like program. This is to be expected. You will need to read the documentation with the software to figure out how to make it and your anti-virus/spyware software get along.

This software isn't free, but neither were child safety seats when your kids were younger. Knowing the dangers of the Internet, to me this software is as important as child safety seats. Even though you may not "know anything about computers," your children are still your responsibility and it is up to YOU to keep them safe, whether in the car or online.

Relationship

I quote from the MSNBC article listed above:

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Handy said parents who discover blogs should try not to overreact and immediately shut off Internet access or community sites; there is a safe way to blog, she said.

"That is the first reaction parents have, to cut them off" she said. "But the kids know that, and they don't want to lose the Internet, so they don't tell their parents what they are doing. And you don't want that. You want the lines of communication open."

She said parents need to be much more involved with their kids' computer use than they are. Many just turn on the Internet access and walk away.

"If they are going to have a computer in the house, they need to be trained," she said. "You don't give a kid a car without proper training. This is just hazardous."

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Conclusion

Please take time to make sure your kids are being safe on the Internet, by installing filtering and logging software. Communicate with them about the risks and benefits of various online activities. If you feel like you don't know anything about computers, take a community education class or have a friend help you learn.

Establish (AND ENFORCE) guidelines about Internet use at home and away from home (at friends houses, etc).

You are the parent. You are in control. Your children and their online safety is your responsibility.

You may reply with questions or comments, and I will keep up to date information and answers to questions at a blog I have set up:

<http://cccsinternet.blogspot.com/>

Thanks for reading this far...and go read the above links if you haven't already :-)

Todd

P.S. I've been working on this e-mail in my head for the last two months...it feels good to finally get it out there to you.