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Our Recommendations

1. Do not allow any chatting functions for children under age 9.

Allowing chatting access to these sites at a younger age encourages and trains kids to consider the Internet to be fun and the easiest source for finding friends or communicating.

2. Spend time going over the sites alone and then with your children.

Create rules and structures before your child begins playing on the sites.

3. Maintain a healthy balance in your child's play to include more time for friends, family or isolated off line play.

While the kids may complain about limited time online, encourage group sports, family events, and

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21st Edition of the Children Online Newsletter.

The January edition of our newsletter focused on the adult social network, Facebook. Facebook has become extremely popular with teens, and even very young teens. Our newsletter was also timed to accompany a companion publication of our article titled ["The Impact of Facebook on Our Students"](#) which appeared on the National Association of Independent Schools web site and in their monthly newsletter.



This month we continue our focus on social networking but shift our gaze to social networks that are cleverly marketed to our youngest netizens, the five to ten year olds.

The most popular of these social networks for young children are Club Penguin and WebKinz. However, there are many other sites that try to attract young children, including McWorld, Imbee, WeeWorld and Shidonna.

As always, we welcome your comments. Our telephone number for Children Online is 413-214-1225.

Best wishes,
 Marje Monroe and Doug Fodeman

Contact Marje or Doug via email at marjem@childrenonline.org or dougf@childrenonline.org for information about our programs or consulting services.

Young Children and Social Networks

manipulative games such as Lego's or puzzles.

4. Consider putting keylogging software on the family computer that tracks all activity online when the child is young.

With this software in place the child grows up understanding the monitoring that parents have over their exploration of the Internet. It is always easier to take away boundaries than to put boundaries in place that did not exist earlier. [See our [May, 2008 Newsletter for Parental Control Software information](#)]

5. Include values and ethics when talking about the Internet.

Encourage children to be the same online as they are in person and to be kind and respectful. A great deal of the language and communication online is harassing, mean and inappropriate. It is especially important for families and schools to encourage children to be kind, respectful and appropriate when online.

6. Encourage children to talk to an adult whenever they feel frightened or uncomfortable about something they encounter online.

Research shows that children rarely talk to adults when frightened or scared online. The children often worry that their families will "take away the computer" if they report a

Today's children are growing up with an inherent knowledge of technology. A three-year-old may know how to use a mouse and keyboard before she can write her name. Computers and cell phones are as much a part of their lives as chalkboards (or whiteboards) and recess. Websites all over the Internet have sprung up appealing to young children with colorful graphics, cartoon figures, games and merchandising material.

Perhaps among the best known, and often most controversial sites, are what we refer to as the "Junior Social Networking Sites"; Webkinz and Club Penguin. Take any 5-7 year old child past a mall or Hallmark store and you are likely to hear a plea for a WebKinz. These very popular sites for youngsters not only provide an online forum for children, but also sell companion merchandise in stores all over the U.S. Webkinz, for example sells toy animals such as dogs, mice, horse, fish or cats that are very cute, plush and attached to a code to use on the Webkinz site.

Children then rush home to the site to "log in" their new toy and begin playing in a fun, animated, colorful environment. Each toy that is logged in is connected to a reward and each toy animal is given an Adoption certificate that kids often hang on their bedroom walls with pride. The site is brilliantly conceived and draws children with fun games and encourages the spending of more money on the ever-expanding number of Webkinz animals available in most malls.

What is often misunderstood by parents is that both Club Penguin and Webkinz are in fact social networking sites with the ability to chat with others including strangers. With the amazing growth of the Internet, parents are left trying to comprehend how their children's lives will be affected. Fifteen years ago it was unthinkable to imagine children communicating with strangers online with the ability to have a live chat or video chat conversation. Now our children have access to this technology in cleverly marketed sites designed to lure children to explore the Internet. Adults without the reference or knowledge about the technology or the workings of the Internet may find it very frustrating and daunting to guide their children through these sites.

A child on these sites can log in and sign up for a variety of "chat" options. Options include limited chat functions that allow passed messages that contain pre-written speech or passed messages that are actually written by the user. Each user has the ability to specify the chat functions. While the sites do allow strict parental controls and encourage children to be safe and smart, these sites are getting children excited about the idea of communicating and chatting online at very young ages. These sites, in effect, become gateways to YouTube, Facebook and other "adult" social networking sites.

problem. Talk to your child; explain your worries and your willingness to work with them to keep them safe.

7. Teach your child to avoid providing personal information when asked in pop-ups or advertising.

About Children Online

Children Online offers innovative and comprehensive workshops on Internet safety and online education to students, parents, faculty and administrators. Our approach, unique in the field of Internet safety, combines a thorough understanding of Internet technologies, child development and counseling, to focus on the impact of the internet on the social, emotional and language development of young people.

Doug Fodeman and Marje Monroe, experts in technology, counseling and education, work together to provide invaluable research and tools for parents and schools with practical real-life solutions to the issues faced by young people online. Since 1997, Marje and Doug have spoken to thousands of students, teachers and parents. They have several publications in the area of Internet safety and offer a free online newsletter. More detailed information can be found at ChildrenOnline.org.

Check out our newest book

Young users on these sites may soon become bored by the limited chat functions and yearn to have more freedom on the "older kid" or adult sites. Just two years ago it was unheard of to have 12 year olds on Facebook or My Space. Today we are finding many 9 or 10 year olds on these very adult sites. Our recommendation is to restrict Facebook or My Space until age 16. Nine, ten and eleven year olds on these sites are greatly at risk and will be exposed to very inappropriate material and are easily fooled and manipulated.

Both WebKinz and Club Penguin can be educational, fun and adventurous for young kids. With strong parental guidance, children can have safe and fun interaction on these sites. We encourage parents, teachers or guardians to review these sites very carefully and make thoughtful decisions based on the individual child, not based on marketing hype.

A few notes:

- Much of the fun and games on these sites are designed to earn money or rewards.
- Many kid's game sites have chat functions. Even McDonalds has a popular site at mcworld.com linked to happy meals and toys.
- Facebook and My Space accounts can be found advertising their presence on some children's gaming sites. It is always helpful for parents to see all sites before letting children play online.

Our Research 2008 - 2009

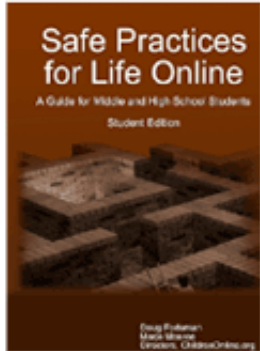
Since September of 2008 through January of 2009 we have surveyed the Internet behavior of 2,660 students in grades 4 - 12 at independent schools in New York State. We will publish a more thorough analysis of our data later this Spring. However, here are some preliminary findings related to this newsletter's topics:

What % of students in grades 4 - 8 admit to having an adult social networking account such as Facebook or MySpace?

- 2.2% of all 4th graders (n=313)
- 2.8% of all 5th graders (n=360)
- 9.7% of all 6th graders (n=403)
- 25.7% of all 7th graders (n=378)
- 60.9% of all 8th graders (n=335)

What % of students in grades 4 - 8 admit to having a

**in both a teachers edition
and student edition:**



YouTube account? (We may interpret that to mean that they are uploading videos to YouTube.)

- 11.8% of all 4th graders (n=313)
- 13.0% of all 5th graders (n=360)
- 15.9% of all 6th graders (n=403)
- 20.6% of all 7th graders (n=378)
- 31.3% of all 8th graders (n=335)

Keep in mind that our experience with children is that they under-report their use of social networks. It is not uncommon, for example, for 30-50% of a class of 7th graders to report in a survey that they have a Facebook account. However, when we ask them during a workshop if they have a Facebook account, 60-80% of hands go up.

**½ Children Online 2009
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