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How Can I Ensure My Teen's Safety on the Internet?

My 13-year-old daughter is online for several hours each day, often when I'm at work and not around to supervise. How can I make sure she is safe?
– Angela

The web can be a wonderful place for kids to learn new things, play games, get homework help, and connect with their friends. But as we all know, not everything — or everyone — on the Internet is looking out for your child's best interest. By teaching your daughter safe Internet practices now, you can help avoid problems down the line.

As kids get older, it gets a little trickier to monitor their time spent online. When your daughter was younger, you may have had a computer or tablet in a common area so that you could keep an eye on her habits. Now, she may carry a smartphone with her at all times. She probably wants — and needs — some privacy. This is a healthy and normal desire, as kids this age are learning to be more independent from their parents.

The Internet can provide a safe "virtual" environment for exploring some newfound freedom if precautions are taken. Here are some ground rules to go over with your daughter:

- **Be wary of strangers.** The same rules apply in the virtual world as in the real world. If your daughter doesn't talk to a person in real life, she probably shouldn't agree to friend them online. Discuss the dangers of interacting with strangers online and remind your daughter that people online don't always tell the truth.

- **Never reveal private information**, such as her address, phone number, school name, or credit card information. The same goes for exchanging photos, especially with strangers.

- **Keep passwords private.** Explain that passwords are there to protect her against things like identity theft and should never be shared with anyone (even a boyfriend, girlfriend, or best friend).

- **Let you know about any new apps, tools, or sites she's going to.** This one might be easier said than done, but if your teen is spending a lot of time on a new online environment, it helps to check it out and make sure you're OK with the activity.

You may have used parental controls or filtering software in the past. These tools can still help prevent encounters with online predators and inappropriate adult content from reaching your daughter, but they don't always work perfectly. That's why it's especially important to teach your daughter how to surf smartly. Tell her about your own online practices and the precautions you take to keep yourself safe. By doing so, you'll help her establish good habits that she can use throughout life.

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