Cruising the Internet: Is It Safe for Your Kids?
Ann V. Deaton, Ph.D.

For each of the following, please choose the one best response:

The Internet offers a:

    a. wealth of information

    b.   host of dangers

Going online is like:

    a. being in a haunted house, not knowing what frightening thing lurks just around the next corner
    b. going to a theme park, with one wondrous and exciting experience after another

When your child "surfs the net", he or she is:

    a. safe as always in the comfort of his/her own home or school
    b. in peril from thousands or even millions of strangers

If you can't answer these questions, you are not alone. Along with the amazing array of information available online, there are potential risks in using the Internet which bring new challenges to raising a child. Because our children have ready access to computers in our classrooms, libraries, and homes, these are challenges that cannot be ignored.
In our own homes, over 50% of us have computers and the options for getting online expand every day. The Internet has become an indispensable tool to many. These days, a child may be online at school and again in the evening at home, at a friend's house, or at the library. An evening of homework may include logging some time on the web to do research, practice skills, or check a class assignment. A trip on the Internet doesn't just answer questions—it can be a miraculous adventure, opening up whole new worlds to an exploring child.

       Unfortunately, not all of the worlds are those you want your child to see. For example, your child's school project on insects might begin with her typing in the word "insects" into an Internet search engine such as www.about.com. With this simple keyword, she will discover no fewer than 2,475 resources on insects just a click of the mouse away. The wealth of knowledge at her fingertips is hardly imaginable. But if your child isn't a great speller or typist, "insects" may come out as "incest" or "insex." In these cases, the Internet sites that are returned from your child's search may include material that makes your child uncomfortable, and material you would rather she not be exposed to. Whether or not they spell their search terms correctly, children exploring the Internet on their own can run across things that they are not prepared for. And the speed with which they can access these sites is as lightening quick!

       The Internet is also potentially dangerous because it is a place where children can be approached by strangers. This can happen by e-mail, instant messaging, and in chat rooms. Conversations online don't provide the cues (tone of voice, appearance) that a face-to-face conversation might offer, nor the setting and supervision to make sure they are safe. A child may think he is confiding in another child in a chat room when in fact

the other person is an adult pretending to be a child in order to earn his trust. These strangers can ask children to provide personal, detailed information, or even to meet them in person. Even the child who has learned early not to "talk to strangers" may not see the harm in "talking" to the computer. Just as you would not leave a lighter on the coffee table for your child to play with, or a medicine unprotected by a child safety cap, parents should recognize the potential dangers a child faces when allowed free access to the Internet.

So what can parents do to keep their children safe and protected, while also letting them explore the web's wonderful resources?

- **Communicating** with a child about the Internet is similar to talking about the risks of tobacco, drugs, and other dangerous situations. Talk to your child at a level they can understand, and talk to them repeatedly about the potential risks. When an opportunity arises, (for example a news report of a teen kidnapped by someone he met online) use the opportunity to help your child see that even smart kids can be fooled.
- **Providing structure** includes having an Internet setup that utilizes the built-in protections available. Depending on your Internet service provider, these options will usually include filters which can restrict the sites your child can access; and limit his or her access to send and receive e-mail and to download files. Some providers allow you to specify the e-mail addresses of friends and family members so that they can e-mail your child but no one else can. Also part of providing structure is limiting the amount of time or the times of day that your child is online, and specifying what information you do not want her to give out over the Internet (e.g., address, phone number, name of school).
- **Supervision** remains the best way you can offer your child a safe and enjoyable Internet experience. Many experts recommend having the computer in an open area where family members tend to gather (e.g., a family room, kitchen) so that the supervision is easily accomplished and a natural part of being in the same place together. Supervision can also be "hands-on": spending time with your child exploring the online world and helping him to learn what's safe and what's not. Being online with your child will also give you an opportunity to learn about his or her interests, to offer suggestions for other ways to explore, and to observe the internet skills he or she has already acquired.

We might not think of the Internet as dangerous, but it can be. Making sure that your child has your support and assistance as he or she explores the online world helps make this world a safer place.