

New online resource helps parents keep up with their kids online

By Matthew Johnson
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Asking adults how they feel about their kids and teens and technology is bound to bring up a wide range of responses, from sheer panic and frustration to just keeping fingers crossed that the kids will be all right. Neither of these reactions is effective, but it's understandable that parents may feel overwhelmed as they watch their children immersed in a digital culture that seems light-years removed from the playgrounds of their own childhoods.

Research has found that parents who understand and who are actively involved in what their kids are doing online – and who talk *with* and not *at* them about issues and content – are best able to work with their families to develop ground rules that everyone can live with. If this sounds easier said than done, Media Awareness Network (MNet) is helping parents get up to speed with a new interactive Web-based resource: *e-Parenting Tutorial: Keeping up with your kids' online activities*.



In this free tutorial, Alice, a witty and cyber-savvy mom, takes parents on a tour of the many different Web environments and activities that are popular with children and youth.

As they accompany Alice through each of *e-Parenting*'s five modules, parents learn about these environments and topics such as how to best use the Internet for research and homework, how to help kids and teens develop positive online relationships, how to deal with inappropriate content, how to help kids recognize when they are being marketed to, and how to tell when they are spending too much time online – and what to do about it!

The **online research and homework** module provides basic knowledge for parents who want to help their children conduct effective online searches and learn how to verify online information. This module helps parents instill a healthy dose of skepticism in their kids by encouraging them to ask critical questions about the Web sites they visit: Who created this? Who owns the site? What do other sites say about similar topics? Because *Wikipedia* is the first place many kids turn to for online research, Alice also explains how the site works and the pros and cons of getting your information from this site.

The Internet is an essential part of young people's social lives, which is why a module about **online relationships** is an important part of *e-Parenting Tutorial*. Kids don't see socializing through texting, social networking sites, webcams and chat rooms, as being any different from having informal conversations with friends – but on the Internet, you leave an indelible record of everything you say and do. This module teaches parents how to help their children limit other people's access to their personal information and to understand the importance of

not saying or posting anything on the Internet that they wouldn't feel comfortable sharing with the whole world.

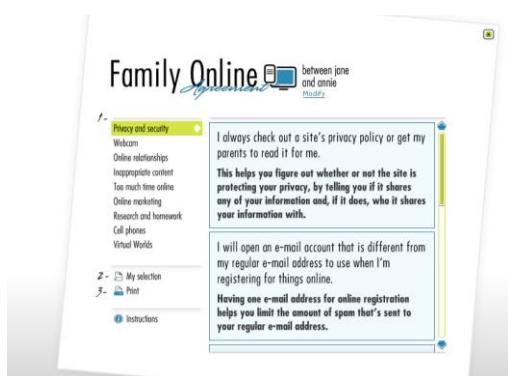
The module on **inappropriate content** helps parents deal with some of the more offensive things children and teens may encounter online: pornography, sites with violent or hateful content, and online gambling. Like any community, there's always a seedier side of town; this module helps young people avoid less desirable online destinations and know what to do when they encounter inappropriate content.

The **online marketing** module guides parents through various commercial environments that target kids. Popular Web destinations like online gaming sites, virtual worlds and social networking sites let advertisers market their products and collect information from children without any of the restrictions that apply to ads on TV or in other traditional media. This module helps parents explain the commercial side of the Web to their kids and give them the smarts they need to know when someone is selling them something and to protect their personal information online.

When it comes to the Internet, when is enough, enough? The module titled **Too much time online** addresses how highly interactive and appealing virtual environments and online games can make it difficult for children and teens to disengage from their online lives – which can then lead to problems in their offline lives. This module offers strategies for controlling Internet use before it becomes a problem as well as tips for recognizing when kids' Internet use is out of control and working with them to find solutions.

The modules, each of which takes about ten minutes to go through, begin with a multiple-choice question about young people and their digital activities – with some answers that may be surprising! Alice's children, Max and Sarah, provide a youth perspective on online shopping and social networking, while Internet specialist Matthew helps parents better understand the issues around online pornography and excessive Internet use. Parents can pick and choose the modules they are most interested in or complete the whole tutorial for a fuller understanding of the digital worlds in which our kids live. A series of tip sheets) can be downloaded and printed off to distribute through a school newsletter or at a parent council meeting.

Family Online Agreement



The overriding philosophy of *e-Parenting Tutorial* is that parents and their children need to work together to craft rules and guidelines for potential online problems; in keeping with this, the tutorial also provides a template for a *family online agreement* that can be completed once the modules have been reviewed.

MNet's research has shown that having rules about Internet use has a positive impact on young people's online behaviours. Establishing these

good habits at a young age – and keeping the lines of communication open as kids grow up – builds a solid foundation for when teens become more independent Web users. It's

important to keep in mind, however, that these are *family* rules, so just as children might be expected to put time limits on their online gaming, parents may also be expected to agree to put away their BlackBerries during family outings.

Finally, for parents who have questions or concerns that are not addressed in the tutorial, the *e-Parenting Tutorial* includes an "Ask an Expert" feature which gives them direct access via email to experts at Media Awareness Network.

To access this free tutorial, visit Media Awareness Network: <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/internet/eparenting.cfm>.

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Matthew Johnson is Director of Education for the Media Awareness Network (MNet), a Canadian not-for-profit centre for media and digital literacy. MNet's vision is to ensure children and youth possess the necessary critical thinking skills to understand and to actively and positively engage with all media.