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YOUR FAMILY, YOUR MONEY, YOUR LIFE

Your Wired Child

You can't run and you can't plead ignorance. If your child is online, you have to be tech-savvy, vigilant and a role model. **By Nia Magoulani-McGregor**

Our children are traversing a magical virtual world filled with easy access to information as well as a myriad tools at their fingertips to share information with their friends and the world. This can work in their favour intellectually, academically and socially, but it can also be dangerous, both emotionally and physically. Just as parents monitor their children's behaviour and relationships in the real world, so too they need to monitor their activities online. →



Ask your child if she really knows everyone on her contacts list

Arthur Goldstuck, MD of technology-research company World Wide Worx, says while parents are usually far less tech-savvy than their children, becoming actively involved in their kids' online lives is non-negotiable.

He says research conducted by his company shows that many parents choose to stay in denial about how skilled their children are online. This, he says, gives them an excuse to avoid dealing with the challenges our wired children present. But Goldstuck points out that, tech knowledge aside, children still need parents' input and guidance on how to interact socially online. They need information on what is acceptable and appropriate behaviour and what is not. 'Children

do not know how to deal with the human issues that arise in many situations online,' says Goldstuck, 'and this is where open lines of communication with parents are essential.'

Last year Norton by Symantec, an international company that specialises in digital-security solutions, compiled an annual report called the *Norton Online Family Report*, which shows that while 95% of parents in South Africa say they know what their kids are doing online, 34% of South African children say they've 'seen nude body images or videos online'.

Further research done on MSN by Microsoft last year for Safer Internet Day – an annual initiative – shows that 36% of parents who responded

don't monitor their children's online activities at all.

The Microsoft survey shows 44% of teenagers have lied about their age when online and that 37% of teenagers contacted by a stranger responded. It also showed that 15% of children admitted they had communicated something via a social network that was intended to be hurtful or intimidating to another person.

Norton's Internet-safety advocate Marian Merritt believes that online vigilance 'isn't about limiting or preventing your child's online life. You need to work with your children as they develop online in the same way that you do as they develop in every other area of their life.'

'Think of it like road safety,' she says. 'You'll always hold a five-year-old's hand and be there when they cross the road, but a 16-year-old will be starting driving lessons and you have to trust them to make their own safe decisions within your guidelines.'

We asked the experts how parents can maximise the online benefits this brave new technological world presents to their children and how they can minimise the risks. Here are their guidelines:

1. BE A CONNECTED PARENT - AND A GOOD ROLE MODEL

While the temptation at hearing statistics like those cited above may be to panic and ban BlackBerrys and online connections, John Buswell, CEO of Rape Wise, an organisation that holds workshops on child- and teenage-safety issues, says the days are 'long gone' when you could tell your children not to have an online profile. Being connected online is a valid part of their social and academic lives – but we have a responsibility to educate them on its dangers

and the only way to do that is for us to 'take off the brown paper bags we have over our heads, stay informed and be good role models', says Buswell.

There are two types of parents Buswell is concerned about: those who are techno-dinosaurs with no computer skills and those who behave like kids themselves – constantly on their BBMs, Twitter accounts or on Facebook, setting a bad example for their children.

'If you are the dinosaur parent, now is the time to start a Facebook site, get a smartphone, get a Twitter account and start practising. Ask your kids to teach you,' says Buswell. And if your tech manners are lacking, you need to make some adjustments and lead by example. 'Don't make kids wait to talk to you while you're on

the world – and Grandma – to read it. You can't take it back!

THE PRIVATE RULE: Do not give out personal information – passwords, name, date of birth, address, location, school name and photos with personal data – or make it easy for people to find you.

Buswell agrees you have to 'teach kids that everything they do online leaves a virtual footprint – it stays online forever so they should think twice about posting. Many prospective employers and universities do online searches on social-networking sites. Teach your kids not to post anything they wouldn't want to be seen by their parents, a school principal, police or predators.'

Finally, he says, children should be made aware that there should be no difference to their online and offline

seems easier for kids to be more open with their parents.'

If you're having trouble getting your child to open up, try asking them what their friends are doing online. This question directs attention away from your child towards general online activities. 'It's a good way to start and keep things neutral.'

Here are some additional questions you could ask your child to spark conversations about online habits and behaviour:

- Do you really know everybody on your friends list?
- Do you ever get messages from strangers? How do you handle them?
- Do you know anyone who's gone to meet someone offline they'd been talking to online?
- Are people in your group of friends ever mean to one another online or on phones? What do they say? Have they ever been mean to you? Would you tell me if they were?
- Has anything online ever made you feel sad, scared or uncomfortable?
- Sometimes kids take nude or sexy photos and send them to others. Has that ever happened at your school? →

34% of South African children say they've 'seen nude body images or videos online'

social-media sites or sending an e-mail from the dinner table. And don't post personal information or images that may be hurtful or embarrassing to your children.'

2. EDUCATE YOUR KIDS ABOUT HOW TO BEHAVE ONLINE

Dr Michele Borba (www.micheleborba.com), author of numerous parenting and educational books, including *The Big Book Of Parenting Solutions* (Jossey-Bass), says there are three 'critical' Internet rules we must teach our children:

THE PEOPLE RULE: Never meet anyone offline that you meet online. People are not always who you think they are online.

THE PUBLIC RULE: The computer is public, so don't post unless you want

worlds in the way they treat others. 'All people should be treated with respect. Children must be encouraged not to support gossip, rumours or mean material.'

3. TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT WHAT THEY'RE DOING ONLINE

'One in five children worldwide admits they are doing things on the Internet their parents wouldn't approve of,' says Merritt. This means it's imperative that you engage with your child about what the coolest or newest websites are. Ask them to show you their favourites.

'Personally, I love having these conversations with my kids in the car,' says Merritt. 'For some reason, when everyone is looking at the road ahead, it

LEARN THE LINGO

Children master a whole new language when it comes to communicating via BBM, text messages, Facebook and e-mail. You need to learn it too:

- POS** Parent over shoulder
- MOS** Mom over shoulder
- PIR** Parent in room
- P911** Parent emergency
- PAW** Parents are watching
- CD9** Code 9 (parents are around)
- TDTM** Talk dirty to me
- PRON** Porn
- GNOC** Get naked on cam
- NIFOC** Naked in front of computer
- MIRL** Meet in real life

4. EQUIP YOUR CHILDREN TO DEAL WITH ONLINE BULLYING

Cyberbullying is an extension of old-style bullying and is on the increase. Whereas before, Buswell says, the victim had some respite at home, now he or she is at risk 24/7 'in their bedroom, on the couch, watching TV' – anywhere your child can access e-mails, BBMs, text messages or their Facebook pages.

Bullying can take place in the form of threats, exclusion, manipulation, public postings, stalking, defamation, impersonations and even 'happy slapping' – taking a video of someone being physically assaulted.

'Your child may not know "cyberbullying" by name but he or she knows what it looks and feels like,' says Merritt. 'Talk about stories you've read or seen in the news about nasty e-mails, embarrassing photos or personal information that was shared or sent around to other kids.'

It is essential that you teach your child how to react if and when cyberbullying does occur. Children should be taught not to respond to any e-mail or message that is hurtful or offensive, says Merritt.

'A response gives a bully or bullies the reaction they seek,' she says. 'Silence will confuse them. If your child gets asked "Did you see that post or message?" teach them to say they didn't, or even say, "My mom was working on my computer last night. Maybe she saw it."'

Tell your child that they should try to save or print bullying messages so that they can show it to someone else. If possible, they should block the bully from having access to their accounts.

It's essential that your child knows they must let either their parents or another trusted adult know what's

happening. 'Experiencing something bad is almost inevitable when your child is active on the Internet. Make sure they know they can come to you for help and you won't overreact.'

Feelings of shame and humiliation might stop children from telling their parents they are being bullied. Borba says these signs might indicate that your child is being harassed online:

- Your child spends unusually longer hours online and appears tense and strained.
- Your child stops typing, covers the screen, hits delete or shuts down the computer when he knows you are close.
- Your child suddenly stops using

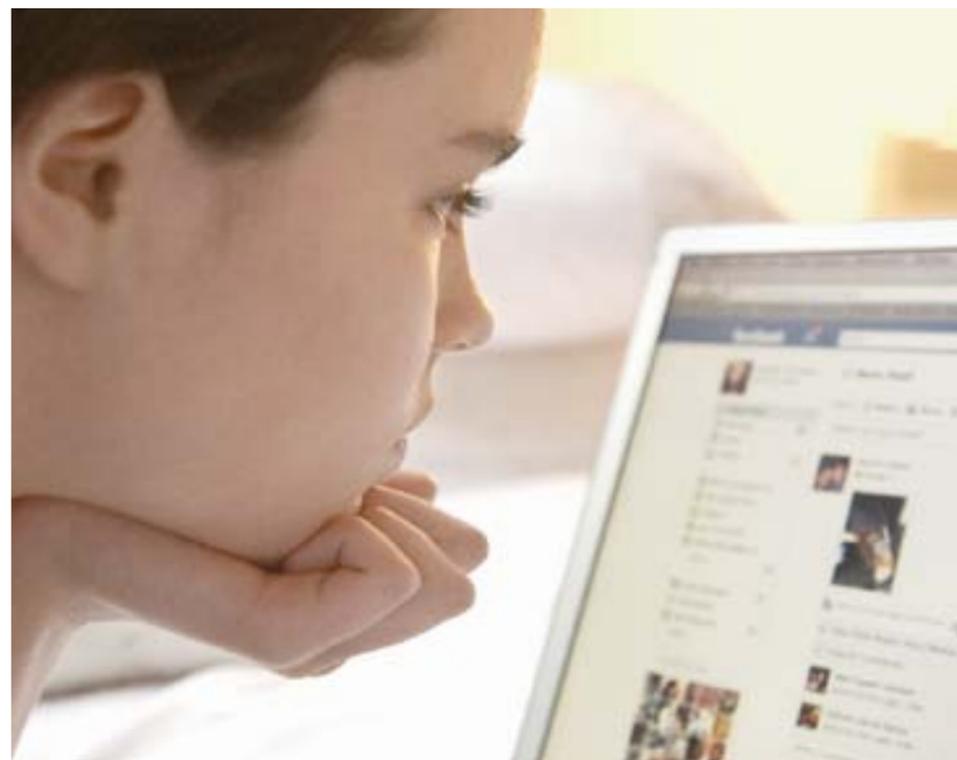
their cellphone, e-mail, web or social-networking devices.

- Your child becomes nervous when a message or e-mail comes in.
- Your child withdraws from friends and wants to avoid school.
- Your child suddenly becomes sullen, or there is a marked change in personality or behaviour.

5. TALK FRANKLY ABOUT SEXUALLY INAPPROPRIATE ONLINE BEHAVIOUR

While sexting – sending out sexually explicit messages, pictures or even short videos to another person – may be an extension of natural sexual curiosity, technology means it's easy to

'A response gives a bully or bullies the reaction they seek. Silence will confuse them'



PHOTOGRAPHY: GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

reproduce, forward and share material. Remind your child that she can't take back any pictures once they're out there. Even if she trusts her boyfriend, relationships end, and they can end acrimoniously.

'If a person under 18 films themselves having sex, they can be charged under the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences And Related Matters) Amendment Act and the Films and Publications Act,' says Buswell. 'And anyone under 18 who takes naked photos of themselves can be charged with possessing child pornography, and sending it to a friend or forwarding it amounts to distribution.'

6. EXPLAIN STRANGER DANGER

Buswell says children need to be warned of predators who are prevalent on the Web. They're known as 'travellers', and they never make first contact in a chatroom. Instead, they'll wait in cyberspace – they'll use a profile of a girl of a similar age or they'll pretend they are a teenage boy – for the victim to make first contact. 'Predators "groom" their potential victims by gaining trust to establish an emotional link, and treating them like adults – especially appealing to those kids with low self-esteem. They know about TV programmes kids watch, music they listen to and the right teen-speak.' They'll make a date eventually, either by gaining your child's trust or by threats like, 'I know where you live.'

Remind children that not everyone is who they say they are, and they should never give out personal information such as phone numbers or addresses. Even posting updates or sending out BBM broadcasts that they're home alone should be avoided. Explain that simple, seemingly

harmless broadcasts – 'Bored. Everyone out' – could put them in danger.

If there is an incident, report it immediately. As Buswell says, 'It probably isn't the first time this person has tried to solicit a teen.'

7. MONITOR THEIR ACTIVITIES

Goldstuck suggests that parents only allow their children access to a computer and smartphone on condition they are able to view contents at any time. While Buswell concedes there may be a fine line between spying on your children and respecting their privacy, he says it's completely okay to ask your children to show you their friends and contacts list. 'Just

Explain that simple, seemingly harmless broadcasts could put them in danger

as you should know the first and last names of the friends they hang out with in real life, you should know the identities of those they're talking to online.'

Borba takes a harder line. She says research suggests that when children know their parents are monitoring their offline or online behaviour, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviour.

'Parenting kids is not espionage if you let them know upfront that you will monitor their cyber-behaviour just as you do offline. Monitoring factors depend on your child's age, social group, maturity and past record of responsibility.'

She says first off, you need to keep Internet access in places you can monitor, such as the kitchen, lounge or family room. Internet access in bedrooms should be off limits.

BORBA SUGGEST APPLYING THE FOLLOWING MONITORING TACTICS:

- ✓ **Use the walk-by rule** 'Emphasise that if at any time you see your child covering the screen, switching screens, closing programs, quickly turning off the computer and not adhering to your family rules, you'll pull the plug. End of argument.'
- ✓ **Check online history** Regularly check history of sites visited and files downloaded, says Borba.
- ✓ **Collect and drop** Borba believes parents should have a designated area where cellphones, iPads or laptops are dropped before they go to bed. Making the bedroom a tech-free zone means children aren't messaging and online after lights out.

8. SET UP A SAFETY NET

There are a wide variety of programs and applications you can download or have downloaded to limit your children's access to certain sites, including: Norton Safety Mind-er: Mobile Edition, a free app that allows parents to keep an eye on their children's smartphone activities; Windows 7 Parental Controls; Windows Live Family Safety 2011; Windows Media Center Family Safety Settings, which allow parents to restrict online content based on a child's age; and Windows Internet Explorer 8 and 9 Parental Controls, which allow parents to view specific and detailed information about their child's online activity.

Remember, smartphone Internet access can also be limited – speak to your service provider to find a suitable product. ■