What Are the Risks?

There are a few risks for children who use online services. Teenagers are particularly at risk because they often use the computer unsupervised and because they are more likely than younger children to participate in online discussions regarding companionship, relationships, or sexual activity. Some risks are:

Exposure to Inappropriate Material

One risk is that a child may be exposed to inappropriate material of a sexual or violent nature.

Physical Molestation

Another risk is that, while online, a child might provide information or arrange an encounter that could risk his or her safety or the safety of other family members. In a few cases, pedophiles have used online, services and bulletin boards to gain a child's confidence and then arrange a face-to-face meeting.

Harassment

A third risk is that a child might encounter E-mail or bulletin board messages that are harassing, demeaning, or belligerent.

While children need a certain amount of privacy, they also need parental involvement.

How Parents Can Reduce the Risks

Most online services and Internet providers allow parents to limit their children's access to certain services and features such as adult oriented "chat" and bulletin boards. Check for these when you first subscribe. In addition there are now programs designed specifically to enable parents to prevent children from accessing inappropriate materials on the Internet. These tools, while not foolproof, are useful for helping parents control children's access, but they cannot take the place of parental involvement and supervision.

The Internet and some private bulletin boards contain areas designed specifically for adults who wish to post, view, or read sexually explicit material. Most private bulletin board operators who post such material limit access to people who attest that they are adults but, like any other safeguards, be aware that there are always going to be cases where adults fail to enforce them or children find ways around them.

The best way to assure that your children are having positive online experiences is to stay in touch with what they are doing. One way to do this is to spend time with your children while they're online. Have them show you what they do and ask them to teach you how to access the services.

While children and teenagers need a certain amount of privacy, they also need parental involvement and supervision in their daily lives. The same general parenting skills that apply to the "real world" also apply while online.

If you have cause for concern about your children's online activities, talk to them. Also seek out the advice and counsel of other computer users in your area and become familiar with literature on these systems. Open communication with your children, utilization of such computer resources, and getting online yourself will help you obtain the full benefits of these systems and alert you to any potential problem that may occur with their use.

Guidelines for Parents

By taking responsibility for your children's online computer use, parents can greatly minimize any potential risks of being online. Make it a family rule to:

- Never give out identifying information -home address, school name, or telephone number - in a public message such as chat or bulletin boards, and be sure you're dealing with someone that both you and your child know and trust before giving it out via E-mail. Think carefully before revealing any personal information such as age, marital status, or financial information. Consider using a pseudonym or unlisting your child's name if your service allows it.
- Get to know the services your child uses. If you don't know how to log on, get your child to show you. Find out what types of information it offers and whether there are ways for parents to block out objectionable material.
- Never allow a child to arrange a face-to-face meeting with another computer user without parental permission. If a meeting is arranged, make the first one in a public spot, and be sure to accompany your child.
- Never respond to messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, threatening, or make you feel uncomfortable. Encourage your children to tell you if they

encounter such messages. If you or your child receives a message that is harassing, of a sexual nature, or threatening, forward a copy of the message to your service provider and ask for their assistance.

Should you become aware of the transmission, use, or viewing of child pornography while online, immediately report this to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children by calling 1-800-843-5678. You should also notify your online service.

- Remember that people online may not be who they seem. Because you can't see or even hear the person it would be easy for someone to misrepresent him- or herself. Thus, someone indicating that "she" is a "12-year-old girl" could in reality be a 40-year-old man.
- Remember that everything you read online may not be true. Any offer that's "too good to be true" probably is. Be very careful about any offers that involve your coming to a meeting or having someone visit your house.
- Set reasonable rules and guidelines for computer use by your children (see "My Rules for Online Safety" on last page as sample). Discuss these rules and post them near the computer as a reminder. Remember to monitor their compliance with these rules, especially when it comes to the amount of time your children spend on the computer. A child or teenager's excessive use of online services or bulletin boards, especially late at night, may be a clue that there is a potential problem. Remember that personal computers and online services should not be used as electronic babysitters.

Be sure to make this a family activity. Consider keeping the computer in a family room rather than the child's bedroom. Get to know their "online friends" just as you get to know all of their other friends.

My Rules for Online Safety

- I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parents' work address/telephone number, or the name and location of my school without my parents' permission.
- I will tell my parents right away if I come across any information that makes me feel uncomfortable.
- I will never agree to get together with someone I "meet" online without first checking with my parents. If my parents agree to the meeting, I will be sure that it is in a public place and bring my mother or father along.
- I will never send a person my picture or anything else without first checking with my parents.
- I will not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel uncomfortable. It is not my fault if I get a message like that. If I do I will tell my parents right away so that they can contact the online service.
- I will talk with my parents so that we can set up rules for going online. We will decide upon the time of day that I can be online, the length of time I can be online, and appropriate areas for me to visit. I will not access other areas or break these rules without their permission.