



Protecting Our Children's Safety Online

By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott

As families across San Diego shelter in place to protect against coronavirus, children are spending more time online – for school, for entertainment, and for social interactions with their friends.

To make this possible, parents have had to ease up on previous restrictions on Internet access. Yet the concerns that prompted those restrictions are no less real today. Protecting children from a pandemic should not compromise their protections against online threats.

As a mother of school-age children, I recognize the role of the Internet in providing entertainment and interaction. As your City Attorney, I want to protect all kids from the potential harm that can result from this unprecedented increase in online engagement.

Online predators are savvy. They understand that children are home from school and parents may be nearby, but distracted with other responsibilities. They lie about their age and identity, earn victims' trust, and try to obtain family information and photos. They may engage in sexual conversation, or suggest meeting in person. Predators can also be schoolmates, who use the Internet to cyberbully or pursue unhealthy romantic relationships.

Navigating all of this is hard for kids as well as their parents and guardians. Here are some helpful tips for protecting your children online:

1. Educate yourself. Online communication is constantly evolving, as are the specific ways your kids use the Internet to connect with others. Risks vary based on the type of usage. Parents should keep up on current technologies and know exactly how their kids are using the Internet.
2. Educate your children. Make sure they understand the difference between a friend and a predator. Explain that people might fake who they are online, and stress the importance of not engaging with strangers. Advise against accepting follow or friend requests from people they don't know and caution them not to include personal information on their profiles. Discuss relevant news stories about online predators around the dinner table.
3. Establish open communication. Internet safety can't be a one-time conversation. It is easier to protect children who feel they can tell you what's going on without getting into trouble. Encourage open and non-judgmental communication if they encounter a stranger who makes inappropriate comments, a classmate who tries to humiliate them or a fellow student, or a boyfriend or girlfriend who is being threatening.

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4. Set rules. Limit online time and platforms. Let your children know you put these rules in place because you love them and want them to be safe. Some families find it useful to create an internet usage contract that outlines family rules. When possible, put rules in place that are consistent with those implemented by the parents of their friends and acquaintances.

5. Discuss risky behavior and unhealthy relationships. Talk about online flirting and how it can veer into uncomfortable territory. For instance, if your child is pressured to keep a relationship secret, contact should end immediately. Tell them it's okay to stop communicating with anyone who asks questions that are too personal, uncomfortable, or sexually suggestive.

6. Talk about sexting and intimate photos. This may be awkward to discuss, but warn teens to never share pictures of themselves or messages that they wouldn't want to be permanently available on the Internet and visible to their family, classmates, teachers, or future employers. Urge them to tell you immediately if anything inappropriate is requested or shared.

7. Monitor Internet use and utilize parental controls. Approve the apps your child uses and know their account passwords. Keep an eye on who they interact with. Look at your child's browsing history, deleted history, and private searches. Most computers, cell phones, smart TVs, and gaming consoles have built-in "parental controls." Learn how to use them.

8. Report online predators. Start by taking a screenshot of the concerning messages. Report potential predators to the platform where the contact occurred, then block the offender and contact police. Keep calm and don't blame your child. Predators expect children to be too ashamed to tell. It's important to be supportive.

As a working mom, I know how hard it is to juggle work and parenting, even in the best of times. Together, we can get through these trying times, and keep our children safe.

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