



Playground Rules Apply to Internet

By Jenifer Gamber

If you are the parent of a teen, take yourself back 10 or so years when your teens were 4 or 5. Remember how they loved to go to the playground! They met new friends and played. With their friends they dug for dinosaurs in the sandbox or wheeled into dizziness on the merry-go-round. We watched our children develop friendships, learn to share, and console a buddy who had skinned a knee. Playgrounds were an important part of our children's developing social skills.

Like any activity, we had rules to keep them safe:

1. Play only in designated areas.
2. Be kind and respectful.
3. Stay where I can see you.
4. I need to meet your friends.
5. Come straight home.
6. Don't talk to or accept anything from strangers.
7. If you get hurt, tell me, or an adult you trust.

Now, fast-forward 10 years. Our children probably don't go to the playground, they meet their friends, play, and explore on the Internet. In Facebook they can write on each other's walls, join groups, invite friends to play scrabble, and grow gardens. Just like playground it can be both safe and dangerous. Just as we wanted to keep our children safe on the playground we want to keep them safe on the Internet. The rules are much the same:

1. Surf only on permitted sites.

Talk to your teens about Internet sites that aren't consistent with the values of your family or those that are more likely to be places where predators stalk. Facebook and MySpace are less dangerous than chat rooms because teens can limit access to their pages to people they know.

2. Don't say something online that you wouldn't say to someone in person.

One-third of all teenage boys and 40 percent of teenage girls have been bullied online. Watch this youtube video by the AdCouncil with your teen: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYaWNYXpBis. Cyber-bullying invades safe spaces—homes. Ask your teen to tell you when they have received hurtful or inappropriate e-mails or comments on their web pages.

3. Keep the computer in a common area.

When the computer is in a common area you know where your teen is surfing and with whom they are chatting. You aren't spying on them, but are available for questions and to keep them safe. This rule lets you meet your teen's online friends.

4. Don't answer messages from people you don't know.

Nearly one-fourth of teens have been contacted online by a complete stranger, most often through instant-messaging. Without visual clues adult predators can pose as teens. But the Internet may actually reduce risks: Teens are at home instead of more risky environments and they can safely choose to ignore strangers. In fact, the majority of teens don't respond to strangers online.

5. Be involved in your teen's life.

Nothing can replace caring conversations. Commit to eating dinner together at least three nights a week or to driving your teen to and from sporting events. Time

together gives them the opportunity to tell you what's going on in their lives. And if they are confronted with uncomfortable situations—either online or offline—you are there to help them make good decisions.

The Internet is much like a playground—it's an important tool for exploring and socializing. But like the playground, it can be dangerous. Establishing simple rules can help keep it safe. Even though teens might push back on these rules, having rules lets your teen know that you care about them and they are not alone, something they need as they grow toward greater independence.

For good resources about the safety and the Internet, see Parry Aftab's website www.wired-safety.org, Pew Internet & Family Life Project www.pewinternet.org, and Frontline's "Growing Up Online" (video streamed at www.pbs.org).

