

Common Sense on Internet Filters

To filter or not to filter

Kids are curious, and just as when they were toddlers, they're bound to get into things we wish they wouldn't. Without certain measures in place, your kids can access everything on the Web. Although nothing can replace your guidance and vigilance, there are some tools out there to help you make sure your kids are seeing the better things the Internet has to offer.

Some facts

53% of all parents say they have filtering software on the computer their children use at home, while 85% of parents of online teens say whether or not they have filters, they have rules about Internet sites their child can or cannot visit (*Pew, 2007*).

4 out of 5 parents who have parental control software don't turn it on, despite being concerned about their children's online safety (*McAfee, 2009*).

43% of young people who have downloaded something from the Internet were 6 years old or younger when they acquired their first digital content (*NPD Group, 2010*).

What are internet filters?

Filtering and blocking programs prevent access to websites based on key words or site names.

An Internet filter is a software or hardware product that prevents kids (or anyone) from seeing inappropriate Web site content. It works by using keywords, and it filters out sites defined by those words. Every search engine has filter options built in, as do all Internet service providers. Blocking software prevents access to sites designated as "bad." Some companies let users customize their lists, but most search engine blocks and filters rely on pre-screening.

Blocks and filters are not foolproof. Determined kids can find ways of getting around the programs. Also, some filters deny access to perfectly acceptable material.

Monitoring and tracking programs capture and record where kids go online, how much time they spend, and what goes on in IM chats. They can also be used to manage time spent on the computer.

Why Internet filters matter

The Internet is the hardest environment when it comes to restricting access to age-inappropriate information and images. In an unfiltered environment, curious kids can (and will) type "sex" or "drugs" into their Yahoo! or Google search boxes and come up with all sorts of sites you would rather they never visited. But even the most innocent searches can retrieve unintended results. This is doubly true when kids search for images.

This urge for exploration is entirely age-appropriate for young people. For mature middle schoolers and teens, you may be comfortable with their exploring online, with your frequent guidance and checking in. For younger kids, given the explicit nature of some sites, you might want to investigate filters or programs that direct kids to safe sites.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **Help kids find positive and safe sites.** There are many ways for kids to safely search the Internet. The browser Kidzui — which has more than 500,000 safe sites — directs kids to selected destinations. We also suggest checking out the ratings and recommendations available at commonsense.org.
- » **Don't let your young children search alone.** Even a word like “teenager” can return inappropriate results. And, if you enter a search for “image” or “video,” the results could be really inappropriate.
- » **Find the right filter.** Some Internet Service Providers offer fully filtered service, but “one size fits everyone” might not be the right choice for your family. A variety of software programs offer different levels of coverage so that you can pick and choose the level of filtering for each person in your family. Some track emails, Instant Messages, and sites kids visit. Other filters offer predator blocking or personal information blocking. Net Nanny, CYBERsitter, and CyberPatrol all received excellent ratings in TopTenREVIEWS' 2008 report. GetNetWise allows parents to fill out a checklist and get a list of tools that fit their families.
- » **Set the content filters on your browser.** The two most popular browsers, Firefox (Macintosh) and Internet Explorer (PC), offer content filters.
- » **Set the content filters on your search engine.** Google, Yahoo!, and Bing all have built-in filters (separate from the browser) that you can set yourself. The best ones allow you to password-protect your settings. You can even filter search results on YouTube using its Safety Mode feature.

Parent tips for middle and high school kids

- » **Don't depend on filters alone.** Savvy kids can defeat filters. Good old-fashioned parenting and Internet safety rules must be part of the picture. This means that you must be clear about what is and isn't acceptable.
- » **Consider checking browser histories.** By middle school, your children will have outgrown filters. Many parents choose to check where their kids been going recently. You can do this by clicking on the arrow next to the address bar or by going into the menu and clicking on “history.” Your kids will consider this spying, so decide ahead of time how you'll talk to them if you find that they've been visiting troubling sites.
- » **Check in often.** Periodically ask your kids to show you what they've found that they like. Showing that you're interested in the good stuff they've been finding may mean they're more comfortable coming to you if something on a site bothers them. Make sure kids know to check in if they see something that's hateful, pornographic, or violent.
- » **Monitoring software has pluses and minuses.** If you don't think your kids are using good judgment, monitoring software will help you figure out if your suspicions are warranted. Parents struggle with whether or not to use these tools because they want to respect their teens' privacy. Think about how your teens will react if they find out.