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Safe Cyberspace Surfing

Learn about llamas, read up on your favorite skateboard star, or study a stegosaurus. You can do all these things online and then email or text message your best friend about it. But when you're moving through cyberspace, you need to stay safe.

It comes down to just a few simple guidelines:

1. Don't communicate with strangers online and never agree to meet in person.

2. Tell a parent or another adult if a stranger contacts you in a chat room or through email or text messaging.

3. Don't enter contests, join clubs, or share your personal information for any reason, unless your mom or dad says it's OK. Personal information includes your name, address, age, phone number, birthday, email address, where you go to school, and other facts about you.

No Talking to Strangers

Since you were a little kid, your mom or dad has probably told you not to talk to strangers. The same goes for the online world. It's easy to meet a stranger on the Internet. You might visit a chat room or get an email or text message from someone you don't know.

It can be fun to make new friends, but **do not communicate with strangers** you meet online. Don't talk to them, agree to phone them, or email them photos of yourself. To a kid, this can seem kind of silly. Why not make a friend with someone who likes skateboarding just as much as you do? The writer might seem really nice and tell you how you sound really smart and cute.

Unfortunately, kids have been tricked online by people who pretend to be something that they're not. Someone might lie and say they're in sixth grade, too, when they're really all grown up and they don't even know how to skateboard. Some kids have found themselves in a dangerous situation when they agreed to meet the mysterious online "friend" in person.

Let your parents know if a stranger emails you, sends a text message, or starts a conversation with you in a chat room. The email could be from a person or a company trying to sell you something. A grown-up should decide what's best to do, which may include changing your email address or telling the police.

Keep Your Privacy

Anybody who uses the Internet has been asked to sign in, log in, or create a personal profile. Kids need to check with a parent or grown-up before doing so. Why? This information could be used for reasons you wouldn't like, like getting a lot of junk email.

Another word about email: If you have your own account, let your mom or dad know before you reply to email that asks for your personal information. Some email looks official, as if it was sent by your Internet provider, but it's actually a trick to get your personal info.

Another way to keep your privacy is to choose a screen name or email account name that **isn't your real name**. For instance, instead of "Jack_Smith," why not choose "Sk8boardKing21"? Only your friends and family will know your code name!

Reviewed by: Steven Dowshen, MD
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diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

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