

## Keeping children safe online

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

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The Internet can be a wonderful resource for children as they work on school projects, connect with friends and play games. However, there are also many harsh realities associated with advancing technology.

Children may be at risk for cyber-bullying, online predators and identity theft. As we approach the new year, Colorado dads are learning how to keep their children safe online.

“The Internet is a wonderful tool for dads and kids to use to spend time together,” said Rich Batten, fatherhood and family specialist with the Colorado Department of Human Services. “However, as children grow older and begin to explore Web sites on their own, dangerous situations can emerge. Colorado dads need to be aware of these issues so they can guide their children’s online usage appropriately.”

The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act requires Web sites to explain their privacy policies and obtain parental consent before collecting or using a child’s personal information. The law also prohibits a Web site from requiring a child to provide more personal information than necessary to play a game or participate in a contest.

But even with this law in place, children need their dads or other parental figures to be aware of what they are doing on the Internet. The following are tips from KidsHealth.org on how dads can monitor and protect their children’s online activity:

—Become computer literate and learn how to block objectionable material.

—Keep the computer in a common area, not in individual bedrooms, where you can watch and monitor its use.

—Share an e-mail account with your child so you can monitor messages.

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—Bookmark kids' favorite sites for easy access.

—Spend time online together to teach your kids appropriate online behavior.

—Forbid your child from entering private chat rooms. Block them with safety features provided by your Internet service provider or with special filtering software. Be aware that posting messages to chat rooms reveals a user's e-mail address to others.

—Monitor your credit card and phone bills for unfamiliar account charges.

—Find out what, if any, online protection is offered by your child's school, after-school center, friends' homes or anyplace where kids could use a computer without your supervision.

—Take your child seriously if he or she reports an uncomfortable online exchange. Warning signs of a child being targeted by an online predator include spending long hours online, especially at night, phone calls from people you don't know or unsolicited gifts arriving in the mail.

—Forward copies of obscene or threatening messages you or your kids get to your Internet service provider.

Dads should also set basic rules for their children to follow while they're using the Internet such as:

—Never trade personal photographs in the mail or scanned photographs over the Internet.

—Never reveal personal information, such as an address, phone number or school name or location. Use only a screen name. Never agree to meet anyone you meet in a chat room, on

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Facebook or MySpace in person.

—Never respond to a threatening e-mail or message.

—Always tell a parent about any communication or conversation that was scary.

—If your child has a new “friend,” insist on being “introduced” online to that friend.

In October 2006, the Colorado Department of Human Services, Colorado Works Division was awarded a \$10 million federal grant over five years to strengthen father/child relationships and improve parenting. Colorado is one of two locations nationwide, including Washington, D.C., to receive this federal community access grant.

The Responsible Fatherhood Initiative distributes more than \$1.2 million in community awards to state, community and faith based organizations to assist in providing direct services to fathers and families. Awards of up to \$50,000 are distributed per program per fiscal year.

For more information on a fatherhood program in your community, please visit [www.coloradodads.com](http://www.coloradodads.com)