

## MUDs, MUSHs, and MUCKs

A MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) is a program that is a cross between a text-based "adventure" game and a chat system. MUDs are usually smaller, better controlled communities than IRC. Many allow users to customize their own virtual spaces. The individuals who run the MUD are called "wizards". Most of the rules that apply to chats apply to MUDs as well.

## Electronic Mail

Electronic mail is probably the cheapest and fastest way of staying in touch with friends and family today. With it, you can probably convince your child to write to family members they wouldn't normally write paper letters to.

In addition, email discussion lists, much like news-groups, allow a group of individuals to carry on discussions on a particular topic. Such lists aren't like junk mail lists, but discussions that people join for the purpose of discussing a particular topic.

Before allowing your child to use electronic mail, establish guidelines about who they can exchange email with. A good first start is to encourage them to write to friends and family they already know.

Once you trust them to start writing to other people they meet online, ensure your child understands they should not disclose their address or their school to strangers, just as you would caution them in real life.

Finally, like your U.S. mailbox, your email box may often find itself receiving junk mail that is easily thrown away. You can also complain to the postmaster of the site from where the unwelcome mail came from.

## World Wide Web

The World Wide Web is a system whereby anyone on the Internet can publish their writings, pictures, movies, and sound files to anyone else who wishes to read them. Both kids and adults have found a voice in this wonderful new medium. However it is

a medium which requires action on the part of the reader. One must go to a site to read the material - it will not jump out of the screen at you.

Parents should spend at least the first few sessions browsing the Web with their children. Establish clear guidelines on the sort of material that is appropriate. When working out what constitutes appropriate material, a good place to start would be the rules you use for bookstores.

If you and your child have an agreement that they should not buy violent comic books, for example, make it clear that you expect them to avoid World Wide Web sites that contain violent comic images.

In addition, if you typically do not allow your child to fill out reader response cards in magazines, ensure that they know they should not type such information into a World Wide Web form.

## Parental Control Software & Parenting Resources

Extremely effective software that blocks your child from Internet sites, as well as monitors their usage is available commercially. VTW has archived a comprehensive list of this software, with descriptions of each product and other parenting resources at URL: <http://www.vtw.org/parents/>

## Who Wrote This Brochure?

The Voters Telecommunications Watch is a grass-roots advocacy group dedicated to educating the public about the online world. To obtain more copies of this brochure, send us a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope and a note at:

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# Internet Parenting Safety Tips

from the  
**Voters Telecommunications Watch**  
<http://www.vtw.org/>

Congratulations!

You have just joined millions of other Americans who have discovered the Internet. If you are a parent, the wealth of information available to you and your family can be truly staggering. Everything you know about parenting offline is applicable to the Internet though, and we provide this brochure to help guide you and your family through your first days online.

Please read this brochure and become an involved parent in your family's Internet experiences. If you treat it like any other family activity, you will find it an enriching and rewarding medium.

Sincerely,



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## Introduction

Because of its flexibility, the Internet can at the same time look much like television, a bookstore, the hallway at a loud party, and even the telephone.

However underneath all the analogies, the Internet has something unique: strong user control over the material you see and read.

Users of the Internet have significant flexibility in what they do and don't read, and you as a parent can make these choices for your kids.

Although most material that you may want to restrict from your child can be segregated with parental control products, the best, cheapest, and most effective way of ensuring that your family uses the Internet in accordance with your values is to make it a family activity.

Even if you suspect your children are better Internet users than you are, spending time with them as they explore the Internet will help instill your values in them, which will serve you when you cannot be together.

Remember, explore together and explore often!

## General Safety Tips

The parenting aspects of the Internet will be nothing new for you. Although the technology may be foreign, you probably already have set rules with your child about how they deal with strangers, what books they are allowed to check out at the library, and what stores they are allowed to enter.

These very same rules will protect your child in cyberspace. In fact, these familiar relationships will help you and your child ease into this medium comfortably. Here are some basic rules that are probably familiar in the real world. Take a moment to discuss them with your child with regards to the online world.

- Remind your child not to engage in conversations with strangers. There are probably plenty of people

you and your child know that are online. Encourage them to communicate online with people they already know.

- Remind your child not to give away their full name, address, phone number or other information to anyone on the Internet. Treat new people you meet online like strangers on the telephone. If your child needs to subscribe to a free service that asks for this information, they can ask you to check the service first.

- Remind your child that television shows they are not allowed to watch apply to similar material online. Remind that they should not read news articles or web pages similar to what they wouldn't be allowed to read in print or watch on television. You probably already have such groundrules arranged with your child. If, for example, you do not allow your child to watch the Barney television show, remind them that this is true online: they should not read the Barney Web site or newsgroup.

As you can see, many of the same rules that apply in the offline world apply to the online world. Below are some tips on specific types of Internet services. You may or may not have access to all of these. Check with your Internet provider to find out what services are available to you.

## Newsgroups

Internet newsgroups are like giant bulletin boards where hundreds to tens of thousands of people carry on discussions about almost every possible topic.

Newsgroups are named in an abbreviated notation that indicates what the topics of discussion will center around, like rec.arts.weaving (the recreational art of weaving) or alt.sex.d (discussions about sex). Some newsgroups have one or persons designated as "moderator", who are responsible for keeping discussions on the topic. Others are simply a free-for-all. Note that unless a newsgroup is "moderated", there is no guarantee that the discussions will stay on the topic in the name.

You may want to start off by reading some of the messages in a newsgroup together with your child, before allowing them to read them on their own. Also, nobody will know that your child is reading the newsgroup as long as they don't post any responses or reply via email to any other persons in the newsgroup. This will allow your child to keep a low profile at first, until you feel they are ready to talk to others online.

Most newsreading software is designed to allow you to jump into a discussion and reply to messages. Note that once your child posts to a newsgroup, they are no longer an anonymous reader. Others reading the newsgroup will see their name and electronic mail address, and may send them email.

## Interactive Chat & IRC

Interactive chatting is the online version of talking across the backyard fence. Online, of course, the backyard is as big as the entire planet. Using either proprietary chat systems, or through the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) interface, you can talk to others in many countries around the world.

Most chat services allow for the naming of a chat "room" that corresponds to a particular topic. Establish some guidelines early on with your child about whether they can chat with others, and what topics they can chat about.

Overall, you should probably set similar guidelines for chatting as you give your child for talking to strangers. Suggest that they talk only to people their own age, and if someone pressures them to talk, teach them to simply leave that chat room or server. As a last, you can report them to the individuals running the chat system.

On IRC these are called "channel operators", and they have the ability to ban a user who harasses you from ever using their IRC server again.