Parental Controls

Key Points

- Parental controls play an important role in online safety for many families. While not a substitute for parental involvement, monitoring, filtering, and other such technologies can help reduce the risk of exposure to inappropriate content, contact, and conduct.

- Microsoft helps meet the needs of parents and caregivers by providing online safety and privacy features in a number of its products, including Windows 8, Xbox 360, and Windows Phone 8.

- Microsoft believes that decisions about what children view and do online are best left to parents and caregivers. Microsoft encourages government to work with industry and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help promote and publicize online safety technology.

BACKGROUND

While the Internet offers many enriching opportunities for young people, there are also concerns—inappropriate content, contact, and conduct (such as bullying and harassment). Societies have struggled with how best to protect youth online while respecting the rights of adults to freely access information and preserving an open and prosperous Internet.

One way to help protect youth is through technologies that parents and caregivers can use to monitor and control children's online activities. These technologies—including filtering content, restricting the download and use of music, apps, and other files, and managing contacts—have been used on personal computers since the early 1990s. Now, as mobile phones, media players, e-readers, and gaming consoles have become Internet-enabled, technology companies have added such parental controls to these devices as well.

Parental controls are widely used in many countries. In 2011, a survey by the Family Online Safety Institute[1] found that 54 percent of parents in the United States used them; research[2] by the European Commission indicated adoption by 53 percent of parents in the United Kingdom.

Despite their popularity and obvious utility, however, parental controls have generated controversy. Some have advocated that governments should mandate their use by minors (and even everyone), a position that human rights advocates and others strongly oppose. Others raise concerns about the misuse of such technology for spying by overzealous parents, controlling employers, and possessive spouses, or for censorship by repressive governments.

Companies that create parental control technologies must balance providing robust tools that empower parents and caregivers to best manage Internet access and use in their families, while respecting free expression and protecting privacy.

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[1] *Who Needs Parental Controls? A Survey of Awareness, Attitudes, and Use of Online Parental Controls*
www.fosi.org/research/900-who-needs-parental-controls.html

[2] *EU Kids Online*
aka.ms/EUKidsOnlineReport

MICROSOFT APPROACH

For years, Microsoft has worked to protect families by providing safety and privacy features in such products as the Windows operating system, Xbox, Xbox 360, Windows Phone, and Bing. Microsoft believes that the company's role in providing parental controls is not to decide what others may view, but rather to give families the tools to implement their own decisions.

- **Windows 8: Microsoft Family Safety.** Family Safety enhances the standard parental controls in Windows (such as web filtering, blocking inappropriate content, and time and program restrictions) with a central online location, the Family Safety website. There parents can manage settings for the computers of every family member and view reports of their online activity.

- **Windows Phone 8: Kid's Corner.** A new feature in Windows Phone 8, Kid's Corner enables parents and caregivers to create special accounts for children that can limit access to apps, games, videos, and music. The child can enjoy these on Kid's Corner on the parent's phone, but won't be able to access functions that might not be age appropriate, such as web browsing or text messaging, or important apps or files.

- **Xbox 360 and Xbox LIVE.** Microsoft was the first gaming console to introduce ratings-based parental controls, Family Settings, for Xbox 360 (the Microsoft video game and entertainment system) and Xbox LIVE (Microsoft's online entertainment service).

  » Console Safety Settings help parents decide and enforce what their children can play, online and off, based on content ratings for games, movies, and television shows, and set limits on console play time using the Family Timer.

  » Online Safety Settings enable parents to create a profile for each child to help ensure that content is appropriate for his or her age and maturity level.

Parents can specify the child's activities, including multiplayer gaming, video chat, and voice or text messaging. They can also restrict who children can communicate with, and who can see their profiles or friends lists.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

- Microsoft believes that decisions about what children can view online are best left to parents and caregivers. Microsoft does not support efforts to require the use of parental controls or filtering software. Instead the company encourages government to work with industry and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help promote and publicize online safety technology. GetNetWise is one such nonprofit organization, which offers guidance and tools to address the latest safety issues for kids online.

- Microsoft supports industry self-regulation as well as thoughtful legislative frameworks in emerging technology areas. As governments address risks associated with emerging technologies and online services, it is important that they allow for innovation in the process.

- Government and industry can work together to establish safety principles and help create a more secure online environment. Examples of this collaboration include the Safer Social Networking Principles for the European Union and the development of an ISP code of practice in Australia.

- Microsoft supports legislation that provides a safe haven for companies that engage in online moderation of behavior and content by not increasing their liability for engaging in that moderation. Examples include Section 230 of the U.S. Communications Decency Act and the European Union Directive 2000/31/EC.

Helpful Resources

Microsoft Security & Safety Center safety guidelines for the whole family
www.microsoft.com/security/family-safety

Microsoft Family Safety software
aka.ms/Microsoft-family-safety

Safety resources for video games and online media
www.GetGameSmart.com

A comprehensive directory of parental control tools and safety education
www.getnetwise.org