

Digital Parenting in the 21st Century

Posted: 02/16/11 03:22 PM ET

Looked closely at your kid's cellphone or that [Kindle](#) or fun little [Nintendo DS](#) gizmo? Turns out that a whole lot of modern devices can pop online and not only submit game scores to a central server, but allow users to surf the Web and visit any site they'd like.

Heck, one of the best advertisements from the Superbowl was a boy whose [Chevy Cruze](#) reads out his latest [Facebook](#) status updates while he's driving.

Dropped your angels off at the mall? Now it's just as likely that they'll beeline to the [Apple Store](#) and update their profile pictures on the Internet-connected demo Macs as they will hang out at the food court and watch for cute boys. The forces of the online world are winning and it's getting harder and harder for us parents to control when, how and for how long our children go online. And that's a problem.

Maybe it's just me, though. Perhaps I am one of a small percentage of parents who believes that while the Internet offers extraordinary access to a world of knowledge, it also harbors dark and dangerous areas, easy connectivity to people who can easily harm young, naive, unsophisticated users.

THE INTERNET IS SEDUCTIVE

Making it worse, I recognize just how seductive the Internet can be. Heck, I stay in touch with my friends through Facebook, chats and e-mail, [Skype](#) with pals overseas and share photos with far-flung family members every week. But as children, our kids are, well, still kids. They may seem tough and worldly, able to keep themselves safe in the whirling maelstrom of the Internet, but the fact is I think it's *our job as parents to keep them safe* and to protect them when they do get into dangerous situations; whether it's that cruel gossip queen in their class or that wave of unknown kids they've just friended on Facebook.

Which leads to the point of this article: it's darn hard to keep track of what our children are doing in the digital world now. In fact, it's odd that companies like [Nintendo](#) and [Amazon](#), companies that are very savvy about parenting and the parent/child relationship, are selling devices that offer easy -- and uncontrolled -- access to the Internet. I'd much rather that my children's Internet-friendly devices all have parental controls of some sort, as both [Mac OS X](#) and [Windows 7](#) offer, but they don't. Check out a site like [Connect Safely](#) and you'll see what I mean. Managing Internet access on modern devices is also much less about computers and more about mobile and gaming devices. Devices that don't seem to pose any sort of threat if you're not paying very close attention.

DIDJA KNOW THAT PHOTOS INCLUDE GEOLOCATION?

Many mobile devices can now share their location through the rising popularity of geolocation games and applications (which also means those uploaded photos have lat/long "EXIF" info that pinpoints exactly where they were taken, including those from school or home). Using a service like [iHound](#) or paying for upgraded "parental controls" from a cellphone carrier you can have a device report *where* it is on a regular basis but that's less important to me than *what* they're doing when they go online.

And speaking of cellphone carriers, do you know *who* your children are texting from their fancy little phones? Do you know *when* they're sending out those text messages? You can see some of this data from the cellphone carrier's online sites (or in your bills if you're retro and still get paper bills) but it's remarkable how poorly the information is displayed and how hard it is to figure out what's going on.

Here's the point of this article: **I want to see device makers pay more attention to us parents who want to know what's going on with our children's Internet use.**

I want to be able to set up blocks on Internet-ready devices that are incredibly difficult to overcome, not so trivial that a monkey can get online within minutes (do a few searches for "override parental controls" to see what I mean). I would also like to have the option of the devices logging some rudimentary information to a third-party site that only I as a parent can access. A steady stream of URLs and timestamps would be a good start.

Companies that offer data of this nature -- AT&T I'm thinking of your text message logs -- also need to revamp the reports to make it easy for parents (and kids!) to keep track of what's going on, perhaps a weekly e-mail that summarizes usage patterns by time and lists unique numbers that sent/received text messages from that given device. If the mobile devices have geolocation capabilities, some sort of geofencing should be an option too, a service that not only logs where the device goes on a map but can notify a parent when the device (and therefore likely the child) leaves a defined region of safety.

IT'S ALL ABOUT SAFETY

That's what this is ultimately all about: safety. I trust my kids, but I know far better than they do that for every 10 nice, interesting, positive people on the Internet there's someone who doesn't share our family values, my ethics and moral code, and might just be willing to lead them down a primrose path into a kind of trouble they're just not ready to deal with yet.

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