

With a great online reputation...
the sky is the limit.

A helpful guide to keeping
your children's online
reputation safe.



ReputationDefender



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For adults, a positive online reputation means professional success, more effective marketing for businesses, and the opportunity for creative self-expression. Adults have a decided advantage over young people where online reputations are concerned—however, we started out late in the game.

Kids are growing up online and are extremely active users of the Internet, and their online reputation begins with their first mouse click. They may be more technologically savvy than their adult counterparts, but kids (naturally enough) lack the kind of life experience that is required to know how to responsibly interact with their peers online. They are information rich, experience poor at best.

When today's adults were growing up, we had a chance to make a good first impression upon meeting someone face-to-face. For kids growing up today, meeting in person often comes long after a Google search, an email conversation, or other online interaction. With the Internet, the "first impression" is replaced by the "whole impression," based on a mixture of online and offline sources of information, that will be accessed for years to come. Help your child to act responsibly and to make informed decisions online not just for the present, but for the future.

Over half the content of the modern Internet is produced by the creative efforts of those who point and click through its pages. The experience of a new world governed by those who create it is historically unique and provides an amazing opportunity for professional, personal, and social growth.

By cultivating a positive online reputation, kids can reap future academic and professional advantages. Thanks to the Internet, young people have the opportunity to be heard like never before. If children are given the critical thinking skills necessary to use this voice to their own advantage, the sky is the limit for what they can achieve.

↑ A positive online reputation can bring countless rewards:

- According to a recent study from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 25% of college admissions offices regularly utilize search engines like Google to research students before considering them for acceptance.

25%

- According to the same study, 20% of these same college admissions offices admitted to using social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace for the same purpose.

75% • 75% of employers do some form of Internet search (including a Google search, as well as a survey of MySpace and Facebook) as part of their hiring process.

- Kids can be teased on the schoolyard if their siblings have negative content about them posted online. A negative online reputation for any family member can have a negative impact for their children.

- Many business connections are made through networking with your child's classmates' parents. Having negative content posted by or about your child can severely damage your reputation as a parent, and as a business owner. Positive content, however, can help establish your positive reputation not only as a business owner, but also as a parent.

Coloring Outside the Lines

Critical thinking is a skill we develop continuously throughout our lives. It takes years for children to develop a proper critical thinking toolkit, but it is one of the most important things they can acquire: Critical thinking helps individuals make smart decisions even when “coloring outside the lines.”

The truth is, nothing about the World Wide Web is “inside the lines.” Traditional tools developed to deal with pre-Internet social situations are largely outdated and often irrelevant. With the rising influence of the web, we have positioned ourselves along a new frontier in the way young people meet, communicate, absorb information, and self-identify. Not only are we “coloring outside the lines” in terms of basic communication and business negotiations, we are re-defining where these lines belong in the first place.

At a time in their physical and mental development when they are still learning to form their own identity, kids have traditionally turned to (1) peer groups and (2) parents as role models and instillers of values.

In the modern era, the media has become a third source of influence for impressionable youth, and the Internet is becoming an increasingly dominant influence in this category (which also includes television, movies, and music.)

While your children may have “schooled” you in technology, it is imperative to instill in them the critical thinking skills that you have developed as a parent and an adult. Your lifelong experience should allow you to see through the technological blur and help your children discern the consequences of their online actions.

This presents you, as a parent, with an excellent opportunity for “give and take”—your years of experience in exchange for their tech skills. This insures that when your children set off on their own, you can rest easier knowing they have the tools they need to make good decisions both on and offline—and the strength of a mutually trusting relationship to know that they will come back to you if they ever need help.

Parent to Internet User Dictionary: A Quick Glance at Quick Typing

IDK	“I don’t know.”
JK	“Just kidding!”
LOL	“Laughing out loud.”
IMO	“In my opinion...”
AFK	“Away from keyboard.”
BRB	“(I’ll) Be right back.”
POS	“Parents over shoulder”
BFF	“Best friends forever”

It’s easy for parents to feel lost in the role-reversed world of the World Wide Web. Being lost, however, doesn’t mean we can’t help our kids make good decisions while surfing the “net”.



The Internet and Your Child: Keep Communicating™

The most important thing that a parent can do when it comes to ensuring their child's safety online is to stay involved. Never stop asking questions.

"How much time do you spend online when you're not at home?"

Kids and teens can be online at any time of day. The World Wide Web is a live, dynamic library of free speech that is available 24-hours a day. Wireless hot spots like cafes, restaurants, community centers, and schools, not to mention private residences, allow your child essentially uninterrupted access to the Internet. With the growing crop of Bluetooth-enabled mobile devices capable of picking up any nearby Internet connections, monitoring your child's Internet use time in the home is just part of the solution.

"What kinds of things do you or your friends usually do when you're online?"

"Show me your favorite sites?"

"Why are they your favorites?"

"I don't know...stuff." This is the answer that parents tend to expect from our teenaged children. Our natural inclination is to be skeptical about this answer, and rightly so. Our children know what they are doing online, and it is our job as parents to make sure the lines of communication on this topic are consistently open.

Pester your children for more information. You may receive, for your trouble, that practiced pained expression on your teen's face that has become synonymous with how "uncool" you are – but, with enough prodding, you can glean a general idea as to their online activities.

"Do you talk to other people when you're online?"

"Who are they?"

"What do you talk about?"

Do your children talk to their classmates online? Do they have friends online that they've never met IRL (In Real Life)? The anonymity of online communication can lead to offline conflict and dangers. Make sure you talk to your child honestly and openly about the possible ramifications of online speech.



“Are you the same person online as you are offline?”

A young person’s online identity is arguably as important as their offline identity, and more far-reaching. It has been proven that individuals both young and old show considerably fewer inhibitions when interacting online. People feel freer to express themselves without fear of repercussions. They believe that the Internet is anonymous; which it is not.

Cyberbullying isn’t only something that happens to our children—it can be something that our children can propagate. Talk to your kids about the way they treat others online. Do they ever say things online that they wouldn’t say to someone’s face? Encourage your children to remember that unseen people behind computer monitors are still people, and their feelings should be valued, not disregarded.

“What is your favorite website? Why is it your favorite?”

A common tactic that psychologists use to draw out conversation from introverted individuals is to discuss a neutral object. Without getting too personal, ask your child about their favorite website. Try to understand what they like about it. Get to know your child through their new interests. You may be surprised by what you find.

Kids tend to enjoy the opportunity to show off their knowledge, and the explanation of their favorite website might well allow a young person to demonstrate what they’ve learned to their less-informed parental units.

“Are there any websites you don’t like? Why don’t you like them?”

If there’s anything we know about adolescents, it’s that negativity begets passion. If you want to start an extended, open conversation with your teen, just ask what they don’t like about the Internet. And find a comfortable chair.

As parents, it would be irresponsible to hand our children the keys to the car without first teaching them how to drive safely. Learning to drive can be tedious, and parental admonitions to “take it easy on the accelerator” or “use your blinker!” are often met with the visual signs of annoyance teens are so adept at producing. Still, as parents, you insist on repeating these lessons of safe driving until our teens began to practice good driving habits independently. The same should be true for the Internet.

↑ Keep Current™

As parents, it is impossible to stay up to date on all the current happenings on the Web. It's even impossible for our kids to complete the same task. There are, however, methods for both kids and adults to gain a general idea of the direction the modern Internet is taking at any given time. Online news discovery and sharing sites like Digg.com are a good litmus test for what's happening on the "net."

For the latest safety information and tutorials, go to iKeepSafe's Parent Resource Center at www.ikeepSAFE.org/PRC. iKeepSafe helps kids and teens become responsible, ethical, and resilient cyber-citizens. Talking to other parents, community leaders, and local teachers can also provide valuable support for families concerned about online safety.



↑ Give Your Kids Some Credit

Teens already recognize the distinction between online writing and offline writing in terms of authenticity. According to the PEW Internet & American Life Project's "Writing, Technology and Teens":

"At the core, the digital age presents a paradox. Most teenagers spend a considerable amount of their life composing texts, but they do not think that a lot of the material they create electronically is real writing. The act of exchanging emails, instant messages, texts, and social network posts is communication that carries the same weight to teens as phone calls and between-class hallway greetings."



Libel, Slander, and Where to Turn for Help

Most parents are familiar with the dangers posed by online stalking and traditional harassment. But there are other dangers for children online as well. Children are notorious for bullying each other, and the Internet has allowed bullies to extend their campaign of terror on a new front. Just a few years ago, most schoolyard gossip and bullying was inherently local and short-lived: the most permanent record a bully could make was a handwritten note, to be read by a handful of students and thrown away after class. Now, false or malicious rumors can spread on the Internet or mobile technologies (cell phones) at the speed of light to a global audience and create a permanent record online.

Spreading lies about somebody else (“defamation”) is often illegal. Doing so online is usually considered to be “libel,” a specific form of defamation.

Unfortunately, it’s often difficult to resolve problems of libel and slander online. Many websites allow anonymous posting; in other words, anybody may contribute content to the website without revealing their real name or contact information. As a result, it’s often difficult to find the person responsible for spreading lies or gossip online. To make matters worse, a very controversial provision of the Communications Decency Act allows website owners to evade all legal responsibility for anonymous content that appears on their site, no matter how hurtful or false the content may be.

Luckily, you can still protect yourself and your children. You wouldn’t enter a house without first knowing to whom that house belonged. In the same way, you should know who is behind the websites that you or your children visit. Most reputable websites don’t hide behind the shield of the Communications Decency Act, and instead work as responsible partners to help solve problems of defamation online. By checking the **“About Us”** and **“Terms & Conditions”** sections of websites, you can find where to turn if your child encounters a problem on the site. Sites run by companies focused on children or teens might be more responsive to concerns over inappropriate behavior. If a site doesn’t provide any contact information, it may be more difficult to resolve any disputes that may arise, and a lack of contact information may also suggest that the site owner is trying to hide from his or her responsibilities.

Unfortunately, you can’t stop other children from using less reputable websites. Keep an eye out for problems and listen to what your child says about his or her online experiences. Search for your child’s name online from time to time. If you do discover a problem, think about whether you can identify the person who created the harmful content. Sometimes there are clues to the author’s identity based on what they say, their language and diction, and the “username” they have chosen. If you can identify the author, many schools and colleges are willing to help address online conduct, especially if the behavior happened at school or is affecting a student’s life at school.

No parent can stop all online bullying. If your child is the victim of an online smear campaign, it often makes sense to hire professionals to help make the damage disappear. Professionals like **ReputationDefender** can help to remove false information from the Internet, and they can also move positive information about your child, like their awards and achievements, above any harmful information that can’t be removed. As a result, people searching for your child online will only find true and positive information rather than immature mud-slinging.

Defamation: communication to third parties of false statements about a person that injure the reputation of or deter others from associating with that person.

-Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of Law

Libel: A false publication, as in writing, print, signs, or pictures, that damages a person’s reputation.

- The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition

Keep Checking™

Helping your child develop critical thinking skills is the most important step in encouraging responsible use of the Internet. Critical thinking will serve your child better than any virus protection program or extreme parental vigilance, and it will help your children develop responsibility and earn parental trust. In addition to this fundamental notion, **ReputationDefender** suggests you follow the 3 KeepsSM from iKeepSafe to help protect your child online:

Keep Current™ with Technology

- Talk to teachers about what forms of Internet safety they implement in computer labs and technology classes, such as filters or monitoring programs, and choose amongst these standards for implementation in your own home.
- Know the capabilities of any mobile devices your child may have. Many cell phones marketed towards children today have browser-ready technologies, which would put the full Internet in their hands with virtually no supervision or limits.

Keep Communicating™ with Your Kids

- Find out who your child talks to online.
- Talk to your child about how they treat others and how they are treated.
- Until you are certain that your child understands online reputations, encourage them to stay away from social networking sites.
- Impress upon them the permanence of any “digital footprints” they make; thanks to Google and the Internet Archive it’s possible to accidentally create a digital record that will last for decades.
- Encourage your child to keep their full name and address private. The more information known about you online, the easier it is for identity thieves to sift through your personal data. Encourage your children to choose a “screen name” or “username” for their online activities that doesn’t reveal their true identity.
- Encourage your child to think critically and evaluate sources of online information, and about promises made by other people online.
- Most importantly, make it a habit to engage your kids in critical conversation—the more you talk to your kids about their online usage, the more they will learn to use digital products in a safe and healthy manner. Consider their habits critically.

Keep Checking™ Your Kid’s Internet Activity

- Keep computers in a central public location.
- Monitor your child’s Internet use: Check browsing histories often to see which websites have been visited, and when. Explain to your child that this monitoring is a condition of Internet use, so that your child is not surprised when you discuss the sites you find.
- Limit your child’s computer time; there’s a whole world of outdoor and offline activities where they should be involved.



ReputationDefender and iKeepSafe know that the key to keeping your children and teens safe online is continuing an open dialog. Healthy online experiences occur when youth understand the public nature of the Internet. Keep mystery out of your child's relationship with the Internet. Give them the critical thinking tools they need to earn your trust and explore our new world—safely.



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