

Your Family and Cyberspace

Introduction

Every day more and more families are discovering how useful the Internet can be. For a nominal fee or even for free, computer users can access real-time sports results, the latest news, extensive travel information, today's stock prices, world-class museums, and countless games and entertainment trivia. For just about any topic, whatever information you want is probably somewhere on the Internet. And as government assistance enables more and more schools to get connected, the Internet is becoming an invaluable educational tool. Schools, libraries, and community groups, as well as business and industry, are making widespread use of it.

Unfortunately, this technology comes at a different kind of price. Some people online believe that the rule of law can't or shouldn't apply in Cyberspace. Some feel that the apparent anonymity of the Internet relieves them of responsibility for their actions. Some suggest that the strength of the Internet is its vast diversity, and they do not want any regulation to cut down on that diversity. Meanwhile, some of the highest traffic on the Web is to pornography sites, while other sites purvey hatred of particular groups and still others are simply new opportunities for old-time confidence artists.

Internet use, then, can be a little like visiting the best theme park in the world and coming across a toxic waste dump.

Cyberspace

Where is "Cyberspace"? It's a world of long-distance connections and access to multiple sources of information. You enter it when you switch on your computer or any medium offering this kind of access. The **Internet** is a global network of computers owned by many different companies, organizations, and now individuals. Think of it as a phone system for computers. The general public obtains access through **Internet Service Providers (ISPs)**, which provide access for a fee or possibly for free, or through **Online Services** (like America Online), which package internet access with a bundle of services that would otherwise incur separate fees.

The global aspect of the Internet is important to note. It puts information from all over the world at the user's disposal. However, it also means that harmful sites can be located beyond the reach of U.S. laws.

In the world of the Internet, some of the most popular features include

- The **World Wide Web**, on which companies, organizations, and individuals establish "sites" with "pages" you can read or download for topics as diverse as government, sports, the arts, and popular television programs. You explore them using a program called a "browser," such as Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer.
- **E-mail** lets you send messages to your friends without all the fuss and bother of envelopes and stamps.
- **Usenet newsgroups** are similar to e-mail but enable you to send your message to one of more than 20,000 topical bulletin boards, where it can be read by others sharing an interest in that topic.
- **Chat rooms** are like dial-in conference calls, where you can stay for as long or

as short a time as you want and communicate by keyboard rather than by telephone.

- **Instant messaging** allows for immediate real-time communication with another person who is logged on to the Internet.
- **Listservs** (mailing lists), either moderated or unmoderated, are discussion "groups" on certain topics, in which e-mail messages are sent to members, who join voluntarily.
- **Video-conferencing** is the ability to use cameras connected to the Internet to have multiple users engage in real-time audio-visual communication.
- **Multiple User Dungeons (MUDs)** are Internet sites where users can join in role-playing games with others.

User Beware

Most parents are concerned about the easy access children have to pornography on the Internet or other potentially damaging information such as hate messages and information on getting and using weapons. Even if you're not looking for these things, they can be hard to miss. It takes only a few mouse-clicks for an inquisitive child to find a sea of sexually explicit or gratuitously violent and hate-filled material, sometimes disguised under web addresses that sound harmless and even helpful. Many of the hard-core pornographic sites ask, "Are you 18?"—but there is no way of gauging how many of these sites attempt to verify the answer before providing free samples of their wares. Even accidental contact with this variety of harmful material can have its effect.

Parents are also rightly concerned about contact with strangers in chat rooms. In a recent survey, for example, about one-third of the readers of a young people's consumer magazine who had been online complained about other users' trying to get their password or using bad language. Adults as well as children have been victimized by sexual predators through the Internet.

The world of Cyberspace puts children and adults, often in the privacy of their own homes, in contact with violent, hate-filled, or graphically sexual material that is ordinarily kept outside mainstream society. Isolated individuals in front of a computer screen can lack the necessary moral and social support to resist what they are being drawn into. Such sites can exert great influence on the social interaction of both adults and children. For some children, for example, "hate-speak" may distort their first impressions of those from other ethnic groups and nationalities.

In the case of pornography, which tends to be habit-forming and to necessitate increasingly graphic material to maintain its "thrill," internet pornography poses new challenges to personal responsibility and puts new pressure on marriage and family relationships. While some ISPs do try to monitor chat rooms, explicit conversations in chat rooms or via e-mail—like telephone sexlines—can draw adults and young people into immoral and even dangerous situations. Like magazines, films, and television programs, websites can provide images that can have the same effect.

The Church and the Internet

Religion can greatly benefit from the proper use of Cyberspace, whether from handy services such as helping travelers find a church for Mass or from the resources for scholarly research in a variety of church-related topics. However, besides the other problems noted, Cyberspace has become filled with a great deal of misleading or simply inaccurate information on the Church.

Just because you can find it on the web doesn't mean it's true; and just because a site

uses "Catholic" in its name doesn't mean it reflects the teaching and practice of the Catholic faith. "Let the buyer beware" applies very much in this case.

Tens of thousands of websites relate to religion—thousands of these purportedly for Catholics. Some represent Catholic institutions, such www.vatican.va and www.usccb.org (the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference). Your (arch)diocese or your parish (or both) are also likely to have a webpage by now. It is good to double-check with the appropriate authorities about them. It takes less than a hundred dollars to register a domain name (an "address" for a website); and although new procedures for registration are appearing, it is still possible that entities other than your parish or (arch)diocese may be using their official names.

Approach all "Catholic" sites not connected with recognizable Catholic institutions or organizations critically. Be aware that there are those who use Catholic-sounding names to spread anti-Catholic propaganda and even pornography. Talk to someone at your parish or diocese if you encounter "Catholic" sites that contain unfamiliar information or odd claims.

What Can Parents Do?

Ultimately, the best protection against internet misuse is the presence in your home of an atmosphere of prayer and the sharing of Christian values, in which these concerns can be openly discussed by all family members. In this atmosphere, your continued interest and involvement in your children's internet use will come naturally—even if you are not particularly computer savvy.

The starting point of safe internet use is to recognize that the rules you live by in the real world apply in Cyberspace, too. If you tell your children not to talk to strangers, the same applies on the Internet. Just as you ordinarily expect your children to tell you where they're going, ask them with whom they log on when they "go out" on the Internet. You listen to your children when they talk about their friends, so listen to them when they talk about what they're finding on the Internet.

The prospect of wrestling with a computer to make the Internet safe in the home is daunting for many parents. Here are four helpful hints:

- If possible, obtain your internet access through an ISP that excludes at least some of the inappropriate material from one of their "servers" (the computers that provide internet access). Check your yellow pages, and call to see if this service is available in your area.
- Choose an ISP that offers parental control features, and activate them. These can be used to restrict access to chat rooms, newsgroups (a small number of which account for much of the worst material), and some websites.
- Some ISPs offer the possibility of keeping a record of sites visited. If yours has this feature, keep it active. You can use it to double-check sites visited by your children when there is reason for concern.
- Be sure to install filtering software. Popular titles include CyberPatrol, CyberSitter, Net Nanny, Surfwatch, X-Stop, or Rated-PG. Remember that the methods—such as keyword screening or individual assessments—and criteria used by these software packages differ.

None of these steps guarantee that your child won't be exposed to objectionable internet content, but they are a good start. Even in an imperfect world, they are important because they communicate your values to your children. If parents don't care about internet use, children will presume that they need not care, either. While protection is essential, it is important to note that filtering software will also restrict the ability to carry

out research on the Internet and can inadvertently prevent visits to some beneficial sites.

When it comes to computers, don't feel self-conscious if your children are leading and you are following—enjoy their knowledge as you would their achievements in sports, music, or any other field. Actually, it might even be enriching and fun—there is a wealth of tremendous information on the Internet about faith, religion, and many other matters. Pursuing it together beats being a couch potato in front of prime-time TV!

A Shared Responsibility

Some argue that the Internet is too big and complex ever to be controlled. There are loopholes in every suggested solution, including turning over to parents the problem of protecting their children—as if it were possible (or even desirable) for parents to be with their children twenty-four hours a day. The complexity of the Internet, however, does not require giving up on it. It means that there is shared responsibility not only to protect children but also to ensure that the Internet contributes to society's civility, harmony, and the maintenance of moral standards. Otherwise it can easily become primarily a vehicle for the propagators of hate, violence, and obscenity.

Parental involvement—It is neither just nor realistic for parents to shoulder the entire burden—how can parents always be there at the school or library, or when disks are swapped on the school bus? However, parents do have a very important role, beginning with the Christian atmosphere they provide in the home and continuing with their interest and involvement in their children's internet use. Parents can also influence ISPs and online services to make ISP-filtered access an option. And just as some parents restrict TV watching in their homes to an hour or less each day, or even maintain TV-free homes, so, too, parents have the option to restrict internet use in the home to a relatively brief period of time each day.

Technology—Some argue that the whole problem has been solved by software filters and site ratings, two different approaches to screening out pornographic, violent, or hate-filled material. But parents can't assume that computers in schools, libraries, or next door will have filters, and most sites aren't rated. Also, filtering systems are not completely successful, and they sometimes screen out useful material along with the objectionable. The same applies to filtering systems that attempt to screen out abuses in faith-oriented material. But while these systems are not a "silver bullet," they are part of the solution. Those who work on the technology side of the problem should continue improving filtering systems so they can provide the best products possible.

Industry conduct—Americans usually expect industries to act as good corporate citizens and have something to say if they don't. The Internet should be no exception. Voluntary codes of conduct in which companies resolve not to knowingly host illegal or misleading material on an ISP's own server should be adopted, as is already happening in some segments of the industry. If more ISP-filtered internet access options were offered, businesses might be surprised by the demand.

Legislation—Government, too, has a role. Not all speech is protected by the First Amendment. If the Internet is to be part of the community, then the laws that apply to other forms of media must also apply in Cyberspace. The supplier of illegal material should face legal consequences, although such legislation will not apply to foreign sites.

Sidebar

Safe Internet Use Tips—No Technical Knowledge Required

- Take the time to become educated about the Internet—it's an investment in the safety and health of your children.
- Select an Internet Service Provider (ISP) that provides the option of ISP-filtered access.
- Put any computer with internet access in a public area of the house—not in a bedroom or den.
- Spend time on the Internet with your child, even if you are only an interested learner—you may be surprised by how much you enjoy it.
- Encourage your children to think about what they find on the Internet and to ask you if, for instance, they find "Catholic" information that doesn't sound like what they've learned about the Church at home or in school.
- Focus on the good sites and material available.
- Guide your children in how to use e-mail responsibly. It's a fun and useful part of the Internet, if used properly.
- Encourage your children to bring anything questionable to your attention, and praise them for bringing problems to you.
- Caution your children never to give personal information—such as name, address, or telephone number—to anyone on the Internet without your permission, and never to send their pictures.
- Tell your children not to fill out questionnaires they find on the Internet without your permission.
- Tell your children not to respond to any belligerent or suggestive contact or to anything that makes them uncomfortable—and to let you know if anything like that happens.
- Do not permit face-to-face meetings with people they meet on the Internet, unless there's a good reason to do so and you or someone you trust is present.
- Don't overreact if your children bring something inappropriate to your attention, or they will be intimidated and not do so again.
- Don't miss the significance of hidden disks—usage of pornographic or hate-filled material tends to be secretive.
- Remind your children that these rules apply whenever they use computers at locations outside the home, such as libraries.
- Above all, communicate. The best protection is good relationships and a healthy Christian family life in which family members talk and pray together.

Your Family and Cyberspace was developed by the United States Conference of Bishops Committee on Communications for use by families. It was approved for publication by the full body of bishops at their June 2000 General Meeting and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Msgr. Dennis M. Schnurr, General Secretary, USCCB

Acknowledgment—We wish to thank the National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families for use of material from their ACTION guide on cyberspace and the family in this statement.

Adapted from *Protecting Your Family in Cyberspace*, copyright © 1999 National Coalition for the Protection of Children & Families. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2000, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc., Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any

information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright holder.

Your Family and Cyberspace is available in a print edition and may be ordered by telephoning (800) 235-8722. Ask for publication number 5-381; the cost is \$15.00 for 10 copies, plus shipping and handling. *Issued by NCCB/USCC, June 16, 2000*

Copyright © 2000, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc. All rights reserved.

[Order Copies of This Statement](#)