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Controlling your Computer

by Fred W. Holzager

The other day, while on a service call at a local home business, I was asked to optimize the client's computer. This client had a computer that was purchased specifically for business use, yet the client had permitted the children to install KaZaa on the machine as an administrator. Why was this an issue? Many children, and adults, find the lure too great to download and record MP3 files. Ask any of the children in the Fair Lawn Schools above the age of ten whether they have a friend who uses a "burner" to make customized music CDs, the answer will be an overwhelming "YES." You may be wondering why this should be a concern. It should concern you because half the time it is *your* child on *your* computer that is doing this.

It is not our position to lecture on morals or law, our interest is in the performance of your computer. If you or your child is recording music using a burner by downloading MP3s from KaZaa or a similar service, then the chances are you have opened up your computer to a miscellany of programs which have the potential to wreak havoc on your system. DSL and Cable modems are great, the downloads are even faster than dial-up. Take the time, review your computer for programs like GATOR and SAVENOW. The odds are that they are present and recording/reporting your actions to their programmers for the sake of siphoning processor power from your computer or delivering personal and private information to parties unknown to you. Some programs will even capture your keyboard strokes and send them out, potentially divulging your online passwords and special accesses.

The newer computers being sold today are typically loaded with either Windows 2000 Professional or Windows XP (Home or Professional). These operating systems afford the "administrator" the benefit of limiting access to portions of the hard drive or simply restricting the user from installing applications. Too many users run their machines using administrative access and, as a result of this, grant excessive rights to both programs and users. How can we control who does what on the machine? Set up accounts, permissions, and access rights for each individual that uses the machine. Reserve administrative access for when it is truly needed, don't grant it gratuitously. By employing the features of the operating system, you can potentially head off a security issue before it can become one. Imagine that your computer is a member of a large corporate network. Do you want to have any and all members in the network to have the access to change and grant permissions by whim or by design? The same premise holds for your home computer. Instead of complaining that it doesn't perform well, review what you have done which may have allowed the situation to occur. Your child may be savvy in computers and ask profusely to have administrative access, but you need to know why.

Open access on a computer allows for inexperienced users to inadvertently install and load programs which may or may not be totally wholesome in nature. If you want to reduce the incidence of slow performance, make sure that you have assessed the legitimacy of the applications that you are installing. Consider using auxiliary programs to help you assure your control over the machine and the sites that your child may visit. Programs such as Net Nanny, CYBERSitter, Norton Internet Security, McAfee Security Suite and ZoneAlarm with Pest Control may provide the added peace of mind that you desire.

If your child is in elementary school, and you want to provide the computer as a resource, then do so, but keep in mind that the child may still require supervision. By installing certain programs, you may further control and/or monitor your child's computer use. Through enabling these programs on the machine and not granting administrative access to the child, you will gain greater control over what your child sees, where your child visits and what your child downloads or installs. Overall, reducing the clutter on your machine, the performance will be less likely to take a "hit".

Disk optimization programs are valuable and can truly help enhance your system's performance, but by keeping the clutter off of the machine from the start, you will find that the computer works well for a longer period between tweaks.

Remember, you children may access machines other than your own. The schools typically protect themselves and the children from offensive or destructive content in a proactive manner. It is your responsibility to recognize the fact that you child may intentionally or inadvertently access a site to which you would rather not have him/her exposed. Some of the programs mentioned above will help protect the system (and your children/employees) from a portion of this content. While it may seem an expensive issue to buy a computer, you need to understand that the subscriptions furnished by the companies which write these "control" programs also enhance their value by keeping the machine you are using current. A virus introduced on Friday will not be recognized by an antivirus program that had its definition updated the day before. The same holds true for the offensive sites and other pesky programs.

As a closing word of advice, if you find yourself beleaguered by spam, it could be the result of your child entering a contest. Help your children learn to use the computer constructively by mentoring or monitoring them in its use. In the long term, your time together with them won't bring a moment of regret.

If you are interested in learning more about the items discussed above, feel free to contact Holzsager Technology Services, Inc. at (201) 797-5050 or by e-mail at support@tech4now.com. For general information about other services for your home or office, kindly visit www.tech4now.com, there you may retrieve additional information bulletins and articles to help you use technology to your fullest advantage.