Practicing Safe Computing in the Office and Home

By Fred W. Holzsager

"*It's ten o'clock. Do you know where your children are?*"

How many times have you sat in front of the television to watch the news and heard that classic question designed to inspire a responsible attitude? My guess is once a day. How many times have you heard this question: "*Your child is on the Internet. Do you know the sites that are being visited?*" Now, what does your conscience say? (Trivia: Do you know where children can learn about the President of the United States? (see the end of this article for answer.))

Growing up in Fair Lawn decades ago meant that you were at home and going to bed around ten o'clock. Nowadays, children seem to be up later, have programmed lives and experience more at an earlier age. Is that the way it should be or is life moving too fast?

Many towns, including Fair Lawn, recognize that they must allocate part of their budgets for technology—offering the children access to new avenues of knowledge (and risk). The schools must consider the exposure and take measures to reduce and control it. As a parent, I made the decision that my children should be monitored when they are on the computer. Why monitor them? They are trustworthy children. They know not to go with strangers in cars, but if a school friend suggests visiting a site based on what *his big brother* told him, your child may be subjected to some inappropriate viewing. I chose to install a software program to restrict the sites that they may visit. I could also enable this through my firewall device. Why is this necessary? Because they ARE children and require rules and controls at this point in their lives. If a child is raised in a home where there is no structure, how is this child supposed to learn how to schedule things in life when he/she gets older? If the same child is allowed to "Surf the 'Net" totally unrestrained, what is to say that my child won't fall prey to some deranged "friend" on the 'Net that wants to meet with my child in a mall? How can I try to prevent an accident from occurring? Hopefully, by taking some of the following steps, my child can be aided in the practice of safe computing.

First of all, a family computer should be kept in a highly visible location. If your child needs to do homework on the computer or perform research online, it is your responsibility to help him or her. Why not keep the computer in a location that is convenient for you to provide assistance? If you do decide that the central computer method does not meet your child's needs or more computers are involved, consider using a program that will allow you to have eyes and ears in more than one place at a time. Purchase and install content-filtering software. Not only does content-filtering software allow you to restrict where your child "surfs," but it also allows you to audit the places that are allowed and determine how long those sites have been visited. It

may sound too Orwellian and "Big Brother" (1984), but you are doing this for your child's safety.

Come to an agreement with your child that he/she will not provide any personal/private information to anyone over the computer without your EXPLICIT permission. With the advent of identity theft on the rise, you are better off having this understanding established. Remember, communications over the Internet can be effected through live chats, instant messaging, e-mail or websites. Your child may see something that looks very official and intimidating, the likes of which even many adults might succumb to, thus providing their passwords or PINs (personal identification numbers) to unauthorized parties. Keep in mind, NO REPUTABLE COMPANY WOULD HAVE ITS CUSTOMERS DIVULGE THEIR PERSONAL PASSWORDS. If you are asked for such information, you may be the target of a scam.

Remind your children that you have raised them to trust their intuitions. If they are in the midst of a communication and feel "uncomfortable" about its content or language, they should recognize this and get your attention. If something illicit is viewed by them, your vigilance and their awareness of what is "not right" should guide you in protecting them from the "bad influences" which are "out there."

Just as you might expect in a corporate atmosphere, have your children sign a Family Computer Use Policy to help you in sharing the computer with the family, while allowing you to participate in your children's life as they grow in this electronic age.

Word your Computer Use Policy as you feel most comfortable. Items to list in addition to some of the previous suggestions might include, but are not limited to:

o   Guidelines for the times when the computer may be used or shared.
o   The extent of details which are considered private and truly are not to be shared.
o   No sending of pictures without direct parental permission.
o   Parents may stand over a shoulder and watch as the child "surfs" at any time.
o   If dirty pictures or language are received, parents will be informed immediately so that they may contact the ISP (Internet Service Provider (*e.g.*, AOL or Optonline)).
o   No downloading of games or programs without parental permission.

Let me stress that a computer used by a child should be equipped with an antivirus program that automatically downloads the latest definitions. This will help reduce the amount of downtime caused by viruses and other "infestations." In addition to antivirus, Content-filtering, anti-SPAM, firewalls, limited access accounts, and password protection can all help to reduce the incidence of a system breach.

If you think this information applies to you or if you are interested in learning more about the items discussed above, feel free to contact Holzsager Technology Services, LLC at (201) 797-5050 or by e-mail at info@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.

Trivia Answer: The website http://www.whitehouse.gov is the correct answer. A website with the GOV ending is a government sponsored site. In this case, had you suggested any other site, you not only would be mistaken, but might regret taking your child there.