

Children, Technology, and Online Strangers

The COVID-19 lockdown has caused a significant increase in children's screen time, and while it can be benign, parents should be aware of how to make it as safe as possible.

One of the many reasons behind this more relaxed approach during confinement could be that parents see no other alternatives to reduce heightened stress and anxiety in their children. Parents might also want their children to stay socially active by communicating with friends and family. Here, digital technology proved to be central to reduce the impact of the imposed confinement offering a plethora of options to stay in touch by texting, voice chatting, and video-conferencing. Texting being the most prolific among adolescents attributed to their wide spread ownership of internet-connected devices, and to the availability of several forms of text-based communication applications. However, such easy and widespread communication may pose potential threats in the form of online strangers.

In the physical world, children are taught about stranger danger, and the same approach should be applied online. The COVID-19 lockdown makes for a good time for parents help their children acquire the skills to manage online strangers. However, it is essential that parents educate themselves about existing digital platforms where communication occurs including smartphone applications, social media, and online games. While gaining knowledge and skills to navigate these digital platforms, special focus should be given to possible sources of contact with strangers.

Online child protection is based on three pillars: opting for the safest privacy settings of online accounts, reporting inappropriate actions such as cyberbullying, or sextortion, and protecting one's well-being by no longer engaging in anything with negative consequences. Before approaching their children, parents should consider the following three factors carefully: their age, personality, and behavior. The best practice is to raise awareness and set rules at younger ages before children receive their devices, then, amend the rules based on circumstances. Especially for younger children, parents should be aware of whom they are communicating with online, and teach them how to protect themselves over the long term.

Social media facilitates the expansion of children's social circles by constantly recommending new accounts to follow, allowing them to sync all their social media contacts, and offering QR codes that let them add people with their camera. Parents can follow their children on these platforms to see what they post publicly. However, some apps permit chats and stories to be deleted after they're viewed. Parents should stay alert to spot possible predatory behavior or inappropriate requests from outside accounts.

With online gaming, children may be competing against strangers who can see their list of contacts. However, the dangers of online gaming versus social media can be mitigated significantly if parents are able to hear what their children are saying over voice chats. For this reason, among others, parents are advised to keep their children's gaming devices in a family room and take an active interest in what the children are playing so that they are better able to recognize when chats go off topic and into inappropriate behaviors. Children should understand never to share photos or information like their real name, school or address with online strangers.

Parents should be very wary if a stranger asks their child in in-game chat to connect on social media, start a private chat, or meet up in person. Some games provide gamers the option to set up a chat which can only be joined by invitation - this can be a great solution if a child plays only with friends they know in real life. Parents should make sure their children know that they can and should mute players who seem to be trying to upset them without hesitation, and that they can block and report anyone who makes them uncomfortable. Parents are also encouraged to talk to their children about being kind online similar to face-to-face encounters. Stay informed about reporting tools the games provide in case they are needed. Children should also be advised to avoid aggressive gaming groups.

Finally, parents should establish themselves as a point of safety no matter what, and let their children know that they can always come to them if they have problems online. With the right approach of understanding, safe supervision, rational conversations, and knowledge of privacy settings, parents should be able to easily create a safe and enjoyable online experience for their children.

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