



RESPONSIBLE ONLINE and CELLPHONE USAGE Guide for Parents & Educational Staff

The Internet or “web” has revolutionized the transfer of knowledge and data to people around the globe. This wonderful benefactor to human development comes at a cost that parents must be aware of. Our children are subject to information overload being permanently “online” or connected via wireless smartphones and tablets. Often the information or images our children are watching are not filtered or appropriate for their age. This is particularly the case with modern cellphones that have unrestricted access to the internet.

Internet Service Providers (ISP’s) and Cellphone Networks have the tools to prevent your child from accessing adult content over the internet. It is important that you **ACTIVATE** all available parental control features that they provide.

YOUR BIGGEST SAFETY CONCERN is peer to peer communication. This is direct communication between children or adults using the internet or cellphones. ISP’s and Networks are unable to monitor this traffic and provide any form of protection for your loved ones.

Parents need to be the one trusted place kids can go when things go wrong. Yet they often are the one place kids avoid when things go wrong online. Why? Parents tend to overreact. Most children will avoid telling their parents about an online incident fearing they will only make things worse through embarrassment, shock and anger.

Take note of these three modern parental issues: **SEXTING**, **CYBERBULLYING** and **ONLINE GROOMING**.

SEXTING - Sexting is sending sexually explicit messages via cell phone or instant messenger. As technology has advanced and cell phones have the capability to record and send photos and video, the practice of sending suggestive and explicit pictures has increased, especially among teens.



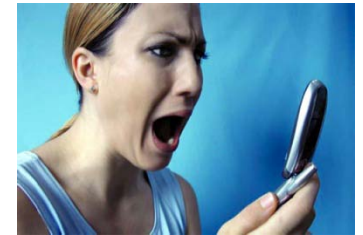
Is this out of control amongst our teens? Not yet. However studies in Europe and the US indicate that 20% of children between the ages of 12 and 17 have sent sexually explicit or suggestive pictures via cellphones. For generations teenagers have explored their sexuality by sending letters and items to one another – the cellphone is simply the new means of communication. Children believe that adults overreact when it comes to **SEXTING** but here are the **FACTS**:

- Digital media sent privately can be **distributed to strangers** once the romance has worn off.
- Most teen girls cite **pressure from guys** as a reason to send explicit messages particularly if there are already self-esteem issues.
- Nude pictures of children fall under the creation, distribution and possession of **child pornography**. The receiving child’s parent may want to press charges.

An innocent picture taken by a 14 year old girl may come back to haunt her when she is nominated for Head Girl in Matric. Helping them think about the possible consequences of their behavior and also the type of image they’d like to represent to the world is one way to encourage them to come to their own conclusions.

CYBERBULLYING - is when a child or teen is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child or teen using the Internet, interactive and digital technologies or mobile phones. It has to have a minor on both sides, or at least have been instigated by a minor against another minor.

Schoolyard bullies have been around for centuries but their modus operandi has changed over the past few years. The social media platforms, Facebook, Mxit and Twitter allow these children to attack other kids with profanity, hate speech and blatant lies with very little repercussion. In the past kids were safe when they got home to their parents; they could talk about the physical abuse they were receiving on the playground. However many children are confronted by these bullies 24hrs a day because their phones are permanently on.



Although the frequency of sexting has remained constant amongst teenagers **CYBERBULLYING** is on the increase and is resulting in more violent physical attacks. Children have been killed or have committed suicide because of **CYBERBULLYING**. The thousands of action groups that are campaigning against this practice is testimony to the growing phenomenon.

CYBERBULLYING is often a form of electronic blackmail as a result of actions or images that the perpetrator has evidence of. It is for this reason that children often feel isolated and helpless and unable to approach their parents.

Be understanding and non-judgmental.



ONLINE GROOMING - is where someone makes contact with a child with the motive of preparing them for sexual abuse either online or offline. Sexual predators are self taught specialists in gaining the trust of your child in order to foster an online relationship. This process can happen over weeks, months and even years.



Perpetrators generally use the following techniques:

- Gather personal details online (e.g. age, name, address, mobile number and school), from social networking sites and multi-player games.
- Offer opportunities for modeling, especially to young girls
- Gain the child's confidence by offering positive attention or a sympathetic response when they discuss problems they're having
- Masquerade as a child themselves or assume another false identity in order to gain their trust

ONLINE Predators often try to isolate their victims from those around them by sabotaging the victim's friendships with peers and family members. This not only makes the victim more reliant on the groomer, but also reduces opportunities to talk to others about what is happening.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO – As with all parenting issues, frequent discussions with your children about all topics is imperative. Parents must ensure that they maintain an interest in the technology their kids are using. If parents do not have the time or inclination to get to grips with online devices it is important to activate parental control features.

- Know what your kids are posting online.
- Talk to children about relationships and the importance of their reputation.
- Discuss their online and cell phone activity.
- Set rules for tech use, including cell phones, and make sure to include, and enforce, consequences for breaking those rules.

Parents also need to understand that a child is just as likely to be a cyberbully as a victim of cyberbullying and often go back and forth between the two roles during one incident. They may not even realize that they are seen as a cyberbully.

Maintain a good knowledge of your child's friends and their parents. Discuss any changes in your child's behavior amongst other parents. Invoke technology that has been designed to protect children and their online activity. This is particularly important in circumstances when your child may be too embarrassed or scared to talk to you. **Don't wait for something to happen – talk to them now.**

The Children's Act of 2005 makes it a parent's right and duty to protect their children at all costs. Children's claims to privacy are super ceded by this act and parent's should not feel guilty for "snooping" through their child's cellphone or email inbox. Too many of our children are being exposed to adult content that could distort their views on relationships and respect for the opposite gender.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO – Schools are in a difficult situation as parents in South Africa demand that their children carry cellphones for safety reasons. However, issues like **SEXTING** and **CYBERBULLYING** are spilling over onto the playground and in the classroom. Teachers' hands are tied when dealing with accusations of cellphone abuse as they are not allowed to investigate the perpetrator's content on his/her cellphone. This impotence towards dealing with these serious issues is a major concern for the victim's parents and they end up feeling helpless.

Along with the issues mentioned above, students are falling asleep during class due to the previous night's cellphone activity that continues well after midnight. The envy surrounding "latest and greatest" technology leads to incidents of theft and victimization. It may be prudent for schools to adopt a contractual agreement with parents that governs the use of cellphones on and off the school premises. Thereby providing them the opportunity to discipline or expel a child that threatens or humiliates another child.

FROM PC TO SMARTPHONE – Parents must be aware of the fact that our children have moved their online activity to their Smartphones. It makes it increasingly more difficult to "cast an eye" over this online activity.

My Mobile Watchdog provides an effective method of monitoring your child's cellphone activity with the added benefit of having all this content stored on secure servers if you ever require evidence of abuse against your child. www.mymobilewatchdog.co.za

My Mobile Watchdog