

## Does Your Child Instant Message? *Tips to Keeping Your Child Safe*

### *What is Instant Messaging?*

Instant Messaging (IM) is a popular online tool used by many of our children that allows for real-time communication. According to a recent Pew survey, nearly three-fourths of online kids ages 12 to 17 rely on instant messaging to keep in touch with friends!

### *What are the Dangers of Instant Messaging?*

Children often unwittingly reveal private identify information in their profiles. They frequently accept messages from people they are not adequately familiar with. Online bullying is another very prevalent danger of instant messaging.

### *How Do I Keep My Child Safe?*

Sit down with your child and ask them to show you their profile. Be sure they have their settings as private, so that only those they invite can view their information. Discuss your child's screen name with them and be sure they are not revealing any private identity information, such as their name, team name, city, or birth date. Together, review your child's buddy list. If they can satisfactorily identify an entry, request they delete that person. Many problems occur when younger children instant message older children. Consider placing an age restriction on who your child is allowed to chat with.

Be sure to include password security in your online safety discussion. Many children find sharing passwords a sign of friendship and trust. This practice, however, places your child in danger of being bullied should anyone ever be able to enter your child's account and pose as them. Passwords should not be so easy to guess that anyone familiar with your child's interests could gain account access. Encourage your child to change their password if necessary.

Together, set online ground rules with your child. Often parents aren't comfortable with the technology and children may not realize limitations on their own.

### *What if My Child is Being Bullied?*

Remind your child that they should never respond to inappropriate, aggressive messages, or any text that makes them feel uncomfortable. Replying to a message will only enhance the situation. Your child should report any incidents to you, print the dialogue for documentation, and block the perpetrator. Sometimes, more than one individual may be involved in the bullying. Should the situation persist, it may be necessary for your child to discontinue use of instant messaging for a period of time until the situation calms down.

Sometimes misunderstandings and feuds occur due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. Messages are often misinterpreted due the limitations of interpreting tone and expression in an online environment.

Keep in mind, that many children surveyed who felt they were a victim of online bullying, also admitted to having bullied others at some time. Remind your child of the need to be respectful when online. Explain that you will not tolerate instant messaging to be used as a tool for spreading rumors or hurtful comments.

### *Stay Persistent!*

Make it a practice to review your child's online information every few weeks. Remember, to keep those lines of communication open!