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The 5 digital parenting rules that REALLY matter

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A guide to the key online safety rules in 2016, by Ann-Marie Corvin

There's a lot of advice about online safety out there, some of it contradictory and much of it about five years out-of-date.

The internet has now become an unavoidable part of everyday life and one that should also be part of family life too.

We live in a time where wild Pokémon are roaming around museums and digital blocks are being used to recreate The Great Fire of London. Who wants to miss out on the fun and creativity that the digital world has to offer?

It would be a missed opportunity for children not to actively engage and develop skills through these digital endeavours and research shows that ultimately digital-savvy kids are far safer online.[1]

So what are the online safety rules that matter in 2016? Here are our five key tips:

1. Building a child's digital resilience will keep them safer than blocking or filtering

The best way of ensuring that children stay safe and make the right decisions online is through confident parenting.

Allowing your child to self-regulate by encouraging their online interests, discussing boundaries and being available for support if they need it is far more effective than content blocking tools (http://parentinfo.org/article/what-are-parental-controls-and-how-can-they-help-children-stay-safe-online).

This is backed up by a study A Shared Responsibility: Building up Children's Online Digital Resilience (https://parentzone.org.uk/article/building-childrens-online-resilience) which was produced by Parent Zone and the Oxford Internet Group in 2014.

Parents might want to think about the following:

- Is the activity your child doing passive? Is it exciting and adrenaline-filled? Are they being creative? Are they talking to their friends? Are they talking to people they don't know?
- The age of the child. Younger children may need more limits set to help them regulate how much time they spend on a screen and have that balanced with offline activities. Older children may be better able to regulate or agree time limits with you.
- Does the child have a healthy balance of offline activities that they do regularly?
- Setting a good example. Parents can help their children by not being intimidated by new technologies, as well as modelling constructive and balanced digital habits themselves.'

'A number of social media sites allow children to have an account when they are 13 years old but it's important to think about the maturity of your child and their ability to understand what having a social media profile really means, eg: people could see everything they are doing, and that strangers could speak to them and vice versa. Even at 13 you may feel it's not the right time for your child to have an account.

'If you do decide to let your child use social media, it's vital to speak to them about being safe online and help them set up their privacy settings together, as well as letting them know they can talk to you at any time if they have a question or they think something weird is going on.'

CEOP, a command of the National Crime Agency

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[1] http://parentzone.org.uk/article/building-childrens-online-resilience

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The study, which looked at the online behaviour of 2,000 14- to 17-year-olds, found that those who were able to self-regulate their internet and social media use were better able to cope when they encountered potentially harmful or inappropriate content online.

Our study also found that building resilience through parental support and self-regulation was also likely to result in children with enhanced digital skills as they are more likely to seek out new opportunities independently and develop and express their identities.

Vicki Shotbolt, Parent Zone CEO says, 'Children need to develop their independence, take risks and find their own ways to cope with things. There comes a point when it isn't possible to keep track of what your child does online. You'll be relying on things you taught them early on, and doing everything you can to make sure that you're there if they need you.'

2. Don't limit the talk you have with your child to 'the online safety conversation'

If a big story about online safety makes the headlines, then you might see it as an opportunity to discuss the issue with them, but don't let this be the limit of the conversation you have with your child about their online life.

Discuss the adventures your children have online, take an active interest, find out what they're good at and like doing and make sure that it's an on-going discussion and that safety forms just part of this.

If your child approaches you about something that has worried them online make sure that they are able to talk to you about what to do if they see something that upsets or worries them. Explain that they won't get into trouble for making a mistake and that you can help them sort things out.

3. Balance taking an interest in your child's online activities with giving them the space to be independent

In the real world, you can't always be there to help your children cross the road without coming to harm – they internalise the road safety messages you teach them and then they learn to navigate journeys safely and independently. The same rules apply in an online environment.

While co-playing your child's favorite game or organising online activities together might be a good way of getting to explore what they like to do online and what they're good at, make sure you give them the space they need to internalise safety messages, make their own decisions and establish their own identities online.

The Oxford Internet Institute research (http://parentzone.org.uk/article/building-childrens-online-resilience) showed that young people who have had the space to internalise safety messages and self-regulate their internet activities are not only more likely to make better decisions in potentially harmful situations, they are more likely to acquire new skills and interests; be more creative; engage more in civic activities and develop richer social relationships.

4. Don't be afraid to set boundaries

Giving your child the freedom to explore online doesn't mean being a completely hands-off parent. Research shows that parental interest and involvement is positively correlated with online resilience – children who are given boundaries will grow up feeling far more secure; so don't stay completely removed from your child's online life.

Set expectations of how they should behave towards others online – their friends and people they don't know. Discuss rules about sharing photos and images of themselves and others: Can they bring phones and tablets to the table at meal times? Can they have them in their bedrooms?

Make sure that these boundaries form part of the overall online conversation you have with your children rather than presenting them with a series of inflexible rules – it's better to encourage them to use their own judgement based on the boundaries you help set out.

5. Concentrate on how children use digital media rather than for how long

There's no 'one size fits all' as far as screen time goes – a view backed by a recent LSE briefing on Families and Screen Time (http://parentzone.org.uk/promobox/parents-should-stop-worrying-about-screen-time-says-new-report). This report argues parents should focus more on the context and content of their child's digital media use rather than the time they spend on screen, as well as the connections they make though it.