Parents, please take control of your child's devices

From smart phones to tablet computers, to the hundreds of channels and thousands of on-demand video offerings on TV, consumers have never had more options for how to spend their time. For parents, however, the amount of content that is out there can often lead to anxiety – about what their children watch on TV, what Web sites they are visiting and who they are talking to from behind all those electronic screens. So what's a concerned parent to do?

To address this issue, many communications carriers have created technology that gives parents control over their kids' use of their devices and services. "Parental control technology" describes a wide variety of software and hardware solutions that parents and caregivers can use to restrict the content their children can access and the people they can communicate with.

The challenge is that, depending on the technology, medium, and service provider, parental control options vary quite a bit, so finding the most effective way to protect your children from adult content you'd rather not let them access can be tough.

Best practices

Parents often worry that, compared to their tech-savvy teens and pre-teens, they have little hope of keeping up with their use of technology. The truth is you don't have to be a computer or technical expert to prevent your young ones from accessing content that you deem inappropriate. The greatest benefit is there is some technology that will help parents understand the language the kids are using today and provide a definition of the word, slang or acronym the child just inputted. It will actually alert the parent instantly via a text message or email.

Here are some basic tips to keep your kids safe online.

- Start your kids early. Once you give them a device, talk to your children so they know what is acceptable, what sites you want them to stay away from, and who they are allowed to text. Monitoring software is there to help protect them from the bad guys. This will help both you and your and children start a dialogue about safe use of technology.
- Find out where they are going online. Get familiar with the Web sites your child or teen visits. Have them show you their favourite sites and discuss what they like about them. By monitoring, you see all sites visited and social network activity. You can block or provide time limits on sites or applications, to ensure your child is safe.
- Don't let your kids to charge their smart phones, tablets or PC's in their rooms overnight. This is the time most kids get into trouble. Monitoring activity will eliminate these concerns.
- Monitor web cam activity and photo's children take/send. Technology can help protect your children as they use these options.

- Make sure your children understand that they should **never** give out identifying information about themselves, friends, or family members. This includes names, addresses, phone numbers, where you work, email addresses, passwords, social security numbers, and credit card numbers.
- Create a technology "inventory." Parents should know what technologies their children are using and what those devices are capable of. For example, does the families' cable television service include on-demand content (potentially with access to adult programming)? Do the children's cell phones include an Internet browsing capability? Monitoring on cell phone devices is a must have today.
- Tell your children that if someone they are talking to online harasses, bullies, or makes them uncomfortable in any way, they should talk to a parent, teacher, or an adult they trust.
- For your teens that are driving, there is technology that will automatically dis-able the texting feature on their phones while they are driving or in the car.

Every family is unique. We all have our own set of criteria for what we are comfortable with. Not all of these suggestions will apply to your family situation, and they are not intended to be a complete list of all available options. Hopefully, this can at least serve as a starting point to begin a conversation about safe practices for your children going online and connecting with others.

The folks at Shield Genie are working together with the PTA in helping educate the parents while protecting the kids. Please visit our website at www.shieldgenie.com to learn more about our Parents Corner and our parental controls software solution.