

Promoting Internet Safety

Some local churches throughout our United Methodist Connection offer effective programs to help parents establish internet safety practices for their families. Some also work directly with children and youth to ensure that they understand and follow safety guidelines and post respectfully when on line. Anyone using a cell phone or other device to access social media needs to know that whatever is posted to the internet becomes public, in spite of privacy claims made by such apps as Snapchat and Picaboo. There is no such thing as anonymity on the internet, either, as everything can be traced to the device from which it was posted, even after it has been deleted. Many Apps that promise privacy and anonymity are actually designed to gather information about their users to sell to marketers. Wise parents will supervise their children's use of computers, cell phones, and other devices and require them to demonstrate understanding of safe practices.

Local churches can protect themselves and their congregations by providing guidelines and by offering programs that promote internet safety. The Annandale UMC in Annandale, Virginia, presented a program titled "Child Safety and Internet Safety for Families" for its Parents and Promises class in the spring of 2013, featuring a guest speaker from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Information presented during this class helped the relative of a participant find a runaway child. Rev. Stephen R. Street, at Varnell UMC in Varnell, Georgia, has developed a powerpoint program on this topic and is willing to respond to inquiries (Stephen@varnellumc.org or 706-694-8023). The Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania posted a document at http://www.diopayouth.org/uploads/5/0/8/5/5085169/social_media_safe_church.pdf urging youth ministry leaders to follow "commonly accepted principles of healthy boundaries for digital networking and communication."

Some annual conferences have developed guidelines and posted them to their websites. In November 2011, for example, the cabinet of the North Georgia Conference approved a statement titled *Social Media Guidelines for Clergy and Congregations* in November, 2011. This document, posted at www.ngumc.org/socialmedia, details how to avoid doing harm by respecting the privacy of others (do not post persons' prayer concerns without their permission) and by following "Safe Sanctuaries" guidelines (copy another adult in order to maintain the "two adults present" standard and transition any counseling requests to an appropriate venue, such as an office where the door is kept ajar). In addition to addressing safety concerns, this document offers practical information about various kinds of Social Media and raises awareness of behaviors that may cause hurt and division in congregations and communities. For example, rather than selecting and inviting particular individuals to connect online, clergy should publically invite anyone who wishes to connect to "friend" them. Clergy should also bear in mind their role as public figures in choosing what to post and share. In 2012, the Indiana Conference posted a brief chart describing how to "Do Good," "Do No Harm," and "Stay in Love with God" while using Social Media (1), which was later adopted by the Oregon-Idaho Conference as well. (2)

Local churches and cooperative parishes might collaborate with the police department, sheriff's office, Parent Teacher Association, and other community organizations to provide internet safety education. The following list includes some of the resources United Methodists have used and recommended.

Resources for Promoting Internet Safety

A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety, a publication of the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. This document contains clear information on parental controls, signs that a child may be in danger, advice on how to report suspicious internet activity, and guidelines to share with your children. <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide>

A Parent's Guide to Understanding Social Media: Helping Your Teenager Navigate Life Online, by Mark Oestreicher and Adam (Group Publishing, 2012). This guide is highly recommended for parents and youth workers.

Covenant Eyes: Internet Accountability and Filtering (www.covenanteyes.com) Visit this website to sign up for a system of filtering and/or accountability for your family. Users can choose an accountability partner to receive reports of sites visited. Parents can also sign up their children, adjusting for age-appropriate criteria and using the reports to talk with their children about different kinds of websites.

Cyber Safety for Families, by Paul O'Briant (Upper Room Books). This training CD includes a PowerPoint slideshow and script, an audio recording, step-by-step teaching plans, and masters for handouts for training parents and adults who work with youth. The program teaches how to set family guidelines for use of the Internet and how to talk with children about Internet bullying. <http://bookstore.upperroom.org/cart/upperroom/p-16574.htm>

iKids: Children in the Digital Age, by Craig Kennet Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014) Children, parents, and grandparents live in the midst of a cultural generation gap fueled by kids' access to digital media on iPads, SmartPhones, and game systems that are shaping their beliefs and values. iKids will help you navigate the world of digital children and ask the tough questions adults and the church need to face as they raise a new generation of children. This book is ideal for parents, pastors, staff related to children's ministries, and Sunday school teachers. The iKids generation, born from 2000 to 2017, is growing up in the most disruptive time since the 1960s. While the sixties was a time of political and cultural ferment, the 2010s are being shaped by a digital wave of change that is challenging virtually every institution of society from the family to Congress and from the schoolhouse to the sanctuary. (Publisher's review)

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (www.missingkids.com) This nationwide organization, with regional offices in California, Florida, New York, and Texas, provides tools and resources for protecting and rescuing children from predators and from those who would exploit them. The tools include a telephone hotline 800-THE-LOST (843-5678) and Cyberline (at the website) for reporting possible child sexual exploitation. The resources

include downloadable videos and presentations that may be used for family or classroom lessons and discussions and links to other relevant sites, such as www.netSMART.com and www.thesafeside.com, which can help children understand why they should not share too much information about themselves online, how to respond to cyberbullying, and the dangers hidden behind apparently friendly invitations.

Sex, Kids, & the Internet: A Workbook for Parents of 21st Century Children, by Francis Knight II (Fort Worth, TX: Knights' Quest Ministries, 2010). The author describes how easily persons may inadvertently access porn sites on the internet, as simply as by typing .com instead of .gov, for some domain names; by clicking on a link or "pop-up" that appears, unsolicited; or by going to a familiar site that has been hijacked by pornographers. Free previews and site tours entice viewers and present them with images designed to stimulate their interest and curiosity. Filtering for pornography must take place at the user level. Knight suggests basic household rules and practices to protect young people from predatory sites and individuals. He also explains how to search a computer, handheld device, or phone for evidence of pornography; set parental controls; and talk to children and youth about use of social networks, posting identifying or incriminating information, and "friending" strangers. Every parent should read this information!

The Dangerous Gift: Book One of the KidsTech Series, by Rob Peters and Cliff Lea (Crossbooks Publishing, 2011). Written for 9-12 year olds, this book describes how 11-year old Trevor is contacted by an online predator while exploring game-related web sites and chat rooms. After becoming suspicious, he tells his father, an FBI agent who starts an investigation. This fast-paced story also addresses Internet pornography and overuse of the Internet. Available in paperback and electronic download from popular book sellers.

(1)http://indianaumc.s3.amazonaws.com/49DDE5F7A5834AAC8457C2F02E95DDE0_SM-Guidelines-INUMC.pdf

(2)http://umoi1.s3.amazonaws.com/8197A508C3BB4DD48DB0AB0481F7D56C_Social_Media_Guidelines_OR-ID_3-8-12.pdf

See also "Protecting Our Children," "Empowering Parents," "Equipping Youth for Healthy Relationships," "Countering Media's Negative Messages," "Facing up to Pornography and Sex Addictions," and other Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources documents posted at www.marriagelovepower.net or (search by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries).

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