

A lamp unto my browser, and a light unto my surfing?

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In today's digital age, young minds have a literal world of information right at their fingertips, on subjects that can be either constructive or harmful. How can we encourage them to make positive choices on their own?

Have you ever seen a child-leash? Perhaps some of you reading this might even own one, or plan to use one in the future. Or, you might be like me, who has difficulty accepting the idea of harnessing children to prevent them from wandering off on their own in public. Though I can appreciate the added security such a device might provide parents, the use of a restraint to maintain constant physical control over a child's activity does not leave much room for that child to learn to self-regulate his behaviour. The fact remains that a child-leash only provides a short-term solution to a bigger problem.

A similar challenge arises when considering young people and their exploration on the World Wide Web. Today's children begin to use computers and the Internet at very young ages, as they should. Technology continues to greatly impact and shape our society and the direction of the future, and the more fluent our children become with computers in this digital age, the more advantages they will have. However, to whom much is given, much is expected, for the same tool that can be used to expand and stimulate young minds can also be used to introduce harmful influences into impressionable minds. Firewalls, filters, and other screening tools help serve as valuable safety measures in this battle, but the fact of the matter is, as kids grow up, we will have increasingly less influence to be able to protect them. Even parents who advocate the use of child-leashes would never use them on pre-teens. The real trouble happens when young people start purposefully searching for the "forbidden fruit" which somehow becomes more attractive if they have been protected from negative influences for a long time. Given these probable, if not inevitable, trends, what can be done? Can educators play an influential role in this arena?

I certainly do not have any foolproof solutions for such challenges, but I do have some suggestions that might help. As educators, we have an opportunity to model positive choices on the World Wide Web to our students. This can be more useful than merely restricting sites we want them to avoid. For instance, if you have ever studied the Sabbath School Lesson on the web, chances are, you're acquainted with BibleGateway.com (where the Bible meets Google). When having devotions in technology class, I often use that opportunity to get students to search for specific Bible verses on the Internet. Sometimes I encourage them to find verses in another translation (if they have not already discovered that feature on their own). To my surprise, a few years ago one of my students told me that they were "hooked" on BibleGateway.com after being introduced to it in my class, which, of course, could not have made me happier.

That is only one suggestion, but there are many more. Right now, the "soup-de-jour" is on-line videos and websites such as YouTube. Well, what about introducing your

students to GodTube? I know what you're thinking, and no, I did not just make that name up. There actually is a website called GodTube.com which seeks to provide only positive, safe, and spiritually uplifting, family-oriented videos. I used one of their videos for class devotion, and of course my students were surprised to know that such a site existed. Truth be told, I only know of one student who searched it in-depth that day, but one is certainly a start! There are many other resources on the Internet, and making a concerted effort to introduce young people to these options could go a long way in developing positive choices and lifelong habits.

My sister once taught my father a valuable lesson when she was still very young. My dad often took her to a jungle gym nearby, and the first thing she would go after was the monkey bars. My father would try to hold her steady as she climbed across to prevent her from falling, and my sister would scream, struggle, and squirm in protest. He only stopped after she reasoned, "Dad, if you hold me on the jungle gym now, what are you going to do when I'm at school and you're not there?" My dad didn't give up complete control at that point (he still chose which jungle gyms they would visit), but he did start focusing on ensuring that my sister could start making wise decisions when he wasn't there. If they haven't already done so, our students will soon be exploring the World Wide Web on their own, unsupervised. Instead of just shielding them, let's start providing them with some wholesome options and principles so they can make better choices.