Parent's Guide to Internet 101
Bruce Wentzell, Teacher, Sandy Lake Academy, Bedford, NS

I am often asked what my biggest concern is when it comes to kids and the Internet. The askers undoubtedly anticipate my answer will be pedophiles, pornography, loss of privacy or the like. But in my opinion, the greatest threat our children face today is uninformed, uninvolved parents. Surprised? Here's why:

Many parents today say: they fear the influence the Internet has over their children. Yet despite their concerns, parents admit they often have little or no idea what their children are doing when they are online. It seems that most children are free to roam the Internet with little or no parental supervision.

The risks and dangers the Internet presents are real and understandably scary. Parents have every right to feel some trepidation about this enigmatic stranger they've invited into their home. And so, we well-intentioned adults try every conceivable approach--from spending hundreds of dollars on the latest high-tech monitoring devices, to banning Internet access altogether. But when it comes to technology and the Internet, there is no high-tech tool out there that can teach kids responsibility or how to make good choices or impart values to children. There is simply no substitute for knowledgeable, actively involved parents. So as teachers, I invite you to share the following with every child's caregiver in your classroom or school:

Shoulder-to-Shoulder Computing

The best safeguard against a host of complex issues surrounding the Internet is to become "shoulder-to-shoulder" Internet collaborators with your child. Shoulder-to-shoulder computing is when you pull up a chair and you and your child go online together. It's when you become partners in Internet exploration with your child.

Why is this so important? First of all, going online with your child is fun! Sharing an online project, like putting together a virtual puzzle, researching family ancestors, or creating an e-mail newsletter, is not only a great way to bond, but also a nice way to discover how two heads are better than one. Second, when you and your child go online together, you automatically set a great example. When Mom or Dad shows a willingness to tackle new things it tells your kids how much you value lifelong learning, without ever saying a word. And the final (and somewhat nerve-wracking) reason to compute shoulder-to-shoulder with your child: there's a strong probability he or she already knows more than you do.

The Double-edged Sword

Many parents seem to nurture a love-hate relationship with the Internet. Studies reveal that while most parents believe the Internet is a wonderful tool for academic success, they are considerably less excited about children's other online activities, like playing video games, chatting for hours or downloading the latest rock music lyrics. It's the proverbial

double-edged sword. Parents are juggling the dream and the nightmare of the Internet at the same time. With its dangers and bad press, why even risk it?

There are a number of compelling reasons. For starters, the Internet offers you and your child numerous opportunities to spend quality time together. The Internet is a cornucopia of content--the perfect tool for sharing family hobbies, developing new interests, and developing a lifelong love of learning for both parents and kids as they explore cyberspace together.

Another reason kids need access to the Internet is that kids who don't develop competency with new technology will find themselves left behind, first at school and later, in the job market. More and more, the Internet will play an important part in a child's education as classes become increasingly dependent on the Internet and other digital technologies. If we don't encourage our children to be computer-literate and Internet-savvy, they may end up information poor and unable to compete in a high-tech world.

But the most obvious reason is--let's face it--the Internet is here to stay. Whether we like it or not, our children will live in a world where computers are as commonplace as televisions, telephones or automobiles.

Kids Know What Parents Need To

As the first generation to grow up with the Internet, kids and teens are, in many ways, the defining users of the technology. Unlike television or other electronic media, the interactive nature of the Internet holds great promise for empowering kids with new tools for communication, education and self-expression. With its engaging, interactive nature and endless variety, experts predict that the new digital media will have a more profound impact on the way children think and learn, what they value, and eventually who they become than any medium that has ever come before.

We're fooling ourselves if we think our children aren't going to be influenced by this brave new world. Even if we choose not to connect to the Internet at home, it permeates our schools, our work, our neighbourhoods and our society itself. We certainly can't teach or protect them if we stick our head in the sand like the proverbial ostrich. How can we guide our children through something we know little or nothing about? Consider a simple analogy: Just as someone who cannot drive a car could not possibly teach someone else the rules of the road; parents who don't have a clue about how Net technology works have little hope of teaching their children good "surfing" sense. Even techno-savvy kids need technology literate parents. Sure, they know their way around the Web, but that doesn't mean they know how to use it safely, wisely, and to its best advantage use.

I believe most parents instinctively get this. It's just that so many feel hopelessly behind when it comes to today's technology. Most kids are technologically way ahead of the adults around them. And they know it. Most children realize their parents lack

knowledge of the Web, and as a result, rarely turn to them for information. Instead, they are relying on their peers as sources of Web intelligence. For parents, this is scary stuff. Do you really want your kids exploring the millions of Internet sites down in little Joey's basement? When parents are content to let their children learn about the Internet through osmosis, the media, the school system, or their peers, the sad fact is, the technology-reluctant adults who love them leave kids vulnerable.

Parent Power!

The key is to empower parents so that they will feel confident assuming the responsibility of educating and guiding their children in the positive and safe uses of the Internet. They need to be able to "walk the walk" and "talk the talk" to keep their kids coming to them for information and to make the Internet a family affair. Parents everywhere are tackling their Internet misgivings head-on.

As enthusiastic as I am, I'm certainly no Pollyanna when it comes to technology. I don't think that technology and the Internet is the answer to everything, and I certainly don't think that every site on the Internet is appropriate for children. I am an ardent advocate for parental involvement and control. But while I'm realistic about the dangers out there, I'm nonetheless convinced of the Web's capacity for good. The fact is, I'm passionate about all the "good stuff" the Internet has to offer. I like how it brings friends and loved ones far away together. I applaud its ability to bridge generation, gender, economic, and cultural gaps. Its capability for creativity and exploration are limitless; its potential as a tool for research and education is un-equalled.

Educate yourself. Be involved. Get in there and do some "shoulder-to-shoulder" surfing. Safeguarding your kids on the Web takes more than just saying "No," it means being able to say, "Wanna have fun? I know some great Websites," and then guiding your children there. For regardless of how little you think you know, you are still the best one to ensure your child's online experience is safe, educational, and enjoyable!