Elementary: Networking sites not always OK for kids

By Margaret Lavin
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KEEPING THE KIDS engrossed in healthful activities all summer can be a challenge. Even with summer camps, play dates and family fun nights, there is still time left for kids to explore independently. Much of that exploring will take place on the Internet.

The Internet is one of the great inventions of the past century. It has revolutionized the way we share information. It is difficult to fathom what the next generation of technology will offer and, as with most innovations, young people seem to better grasp its uses and possibilities.

Social networking Web sites provide instant access to people and places around the world. They have become invaluable resources for their users. However, they can be dangerous: With a few keystrokes, anyone, of any age, can be bombarded with offensive images or come in contact with — and possibly be coerced by — ill-willed strangers.

We warn our children not to talk with strangers, but strangers can now enter our homes through the Internet. So, parents need to monitor their naive, vulnerable, inquisitive teens and tweens by becoming text-, Twitter-, and Internet-savvy.

It has become more apparent that cyberspace is a pedophile's playground. There are thousands of disturbing stories — so many that "Dateline NBC" ran a series of reports called "To Catch a Predator."

Just recently a Newark man was arrested after being accused of attempting to meet a

13-year-old girl for sex. The girl's father alerted police after discovering text messages.

Here are some ways you can heighten the level of protection for your children.

• Talk with your children about the potential dangers of online predators. It may be uncomfortable, like those awkward discussions about sex and drugs, but it is just as necessary.
• Inform your kids that many people in Internet chat rooms lie about their true identity and age. Find out who they are talking to online. Knowing the neighborhood kids is no longer enough. Be familiar with cyberspace "friends" as well. An informative site to share with your kids is www.nsteens.org. It provides teen-friendly advice on appropriate social networking, cyberbullying and much more.
• Become familiar with Internet and texting lingo. Go to www.netlingo.com. and click on "Top 50 Internet Acronyms Parents Need To Know." Be warned: Some of it is unsavory. Boy, were my eyes opened!
• Invest in some parental control software. Many allow parents to review Internet usage from anywhere, which is ideal for when you're at work. There are also time-control tools for both phones and computers to limit minutes and time online per family member per day, week or month.

- Be strict and clear about the usage rules and make sure your kids' friends and their family members know them, too. If rules are broken, shut down the computer and take away the phone for a while.
- Be a watchdog and a good listener.

All these protective precautions need to be coupled with open lines of communication. Share in your children's life experiences. Give them the guidance to make right choices when they are not under your watchful eye and the courage and confidence to ask for your help if they do make a mistake.

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