Child Safety and the Internet

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Twenty years ago I was 16 and starting college. One of the first things I did at college was to find the Internet, and it was great.

Chat rooms were newsgroups and to Instant Message someone you had to know a modicum of Unix.

My favorite newsgroup was sci.chem. The group was populated with Chemistry professors, Chemistry students, and industry professionals across world. Conversations ranged from hard core Chemistry to philosophical questions such as "If a chemical is synthesized but is indistinguishable from the natural version, does it matter? Should it be labeled differently in products?"

I developed mini-friendships with people I never met, never saw, and never talked to. I played online games with people I didn't know; I only knew their alter egos and avatars. One of my favorite characters to play was Gabrielle, a Rodent Of Unusual Size who lived in a Fire Swamp (think /Princess Bride/).

I knew people who met over the Internet, got married. Some had kids; some divorced.

Was it dangerous? I mean, if I could profess to be a large rat were the people claiming to be teenage girls or college boys really 50-year-old men? Not really. Back then it wasn't all that dangerous because to have Internet access you pretty much had to be a student, professor, government employee, work for a computer company, or live in a different country. I double majored in Computer Science just to keep my Internet access. It was a big deal.

But, it's all changed. Now anyone and their dog Spot can have Internet access. My dog has a web page. I had my 3-year-old's website up before I left the hospital. My dad uses the Internet regularly and sends his columns into the local paper without leaving home. My mom learned how to play Internet poker. My 70-year-old mother-in-law is an expert at printing out pictures of grandbabies and sending email to her sisters. Anyone can use the Internet now. It's not just for nerds anymore. Most of you reading this probably don't even know what Unix is.

Since the Internet has reached the general population, it is filled with the general population.
So, should you ban the 'net in your house? I don't think so. I still love* the 'net. I love it that when I'm talking with my husband or sister and one of us has an odd question like "What was Ronald Reagan's first movie?" or "Who were the first 20 presidents of this country?" or "Do polar bears have carnassial teeth?" that I can walk over to my computer, type in a few words, and there's the answer. It's a lot easier than searching out encyclopedias or walking to the library. Oh, and one of the best things about the 'net comes in handy when reading my father's letters. My father is an erudite man with a large vocabulary who has caused me to repeatedly use Webster's Online.

Should children be kept out of chat rooms and have their email screened? Well, I imagine that depends on the kid. If my biological children keep developing as they are, I don't think my husband or I will monitor them too closely. They'll know early on that if they can pretend to be a large rat that there's no reason to believe that other person isn't also pretending. We had a teenage foreign exchange student for a while, and I didn't feel a need to monitor her 'net usage. She was a smart cookie and she understood what was going on.

I also had a teenage foster child in my home. She was so desperate for companionship, love, and attention that I did not trust her on the Internet.

So, how did I try to protect the teenager who couldn't protect herself?

* All of the family's computers are in the living room. This is the room we spend the most time in. She could not be on the computer without us being able to glance over at her screen.

* I tried a net nanny program for a while. I didn't even install it on all our computers. I hated it. It blocked too many sites that I found useful to me. Net nanny programs work well for some people, so they're an option.

* I noticed the teenager saved all her information in cookies and the like. What did that mean to me? I could log into any of her accounts and read her email and change settings. I distinctly remember putting any email for "hotornot.com" on a blacklist so she would never get it.

* The teenager set up a myspace account, so I did also. I forced myself to play around on that site for a while to learn what it was about. This caused me to regularly check what she had on her site.

* I had to learn some infernal acronyms. Fortunately for me, most of the ones from 20 years ago are still valid. However, there are a lot more of them now too.

* Learn, learn, learn. I had to keep one step ahead of a kid determined to get herself hurt.
Here's some websites to visit to help you learn, learn, learn.


* [http://www.FamilyWatchdog.us](http://www.FamilyWatchdog.us) and [http://www.NationalAlertRegistry.com](http://www.NationalAlertRegistry.com) *has lists of registered sex offenders. Which ones are living near you?

* [http://www.GetNetWise.org](http://www.GetNetWise.org) - Learn about various aspects of the Internet, including child protection

* [http://WiredSafety.org](http://WiredSafety.org) - This is a volunteer run charity that helps protect children from the Internet

* [http://www.MySpace.com](http://www.MySpace.com) - Does your child have a website or blog? It might be here.

* [http://www.google.com](http://www.google.com) - Type in your kid's name and search. If that doesn't reveal anything, type in the names of your kid's friends, one by one. You can also add city or state to the search if your child has a common name.

* [http://www.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/Child_Safety/](http://www.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/Child_Safety/) - This is a list of child safety Internet sites.

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