

**Suggested title:****Could you recognize an online ‘stranger?’**

So, your son or daughter asks if they can go to the movies with friends. Your accepted family rule is that you must know everyone in the group, or your child can't go. It's all about safety.

Establishing rules about who your children spend time with – and making them aware of “stranger danger” – can help keep them safe, not only in the real world but the virtual one as well. Strangers online are no different from strangers in real life: they look for vulnerabilities in youngsters. But because of the anonymity of the Internet, strangers who pose potential dangers online are harder to recognize.

Educating ourselves and our kids can protect them and help them take advantage of the Internet's benefits. Organizations such as the National Crime Prevention Council offer tips on Internet safety. Here are a handful of guidelines to consider:

- Keep the family's computer in a common area of your home, such as a kitchen desk area.
- Talk with your children about the Internet's benefits and risks. Ask them to show you their favorite online places.
- Together, establish rules, such as how much time they can spend online and what they can do. Post rules on or near the computer. Consider allowing access to the Internet only when you are home.
- Help your kids understand that their online activities – whether sending e-mail, visiting chat rooms or playing games – are not private. In addition, be up front about the fact that you monitor their online activities just as you do their other activities. If your child wants privacy, encourage them to write in a journal or diary.
- If your child has an online friends list, be sure the names are friends they know in real life. Help your child recognize that people are not always who they say they are. Talk with your child about always using a screen name instead of their real name.
- Educate yourself and your kids about what personal information is and why they should never provide it online.
- While monitoring your child's online activities, report to the respective Web site any inappropriate language or activity you see. Make it OK for your child to talk with you if he or she sees something inappropriate online.
- Explore filtering tools and parental controls, but do not rely on them entirely for your child's protection online.