

BOUNDARIES FOR CYBERKIDS

by Brian Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

Across the USA parents are fighting to get their kids' attention. The computer, an iPod, or a mobile phone is a constant companion to our children. I'm in Australia at present and it's the same here. School kids are talking loudly on their phones in public places. Others wear concealed iPod and MP3 players and are listening to their music through ear buds. Others pass the time on public transport playing hand held video games.

It's the same in the States. What is happening in the home? As soon as students get home many head straight for the fridge and cookie jar, then take their spoils to their cyber toys. This is pretty worrying because the sedentary nature of these activities is not providing a solution to the massive obesity problem in our country. Nor is homework receiving due attention. Other western nations are saying the same things in their media. How can you limit the use of this technology so your child can maintain a balanced life?

Many children are getting into computer chat rooms, developing personal profile pages on Face Book, and are listing personal information that could put them or their family's safety in jeopardy. Children are not communicating as much with parents or their siblings. In fact, many parents say they are lucky to get a word out of their children once they get home and on to the equipment. What is this doing long-term for general communication skills? One parent said that her daughter is unable to communicate with her unless she is in front of a computer keyboard. She states that she no longer eats dinner with her children because they are all into their media toys and don't want to eat at the table. I wonder who's in charge in that family!

So many parents are unaware of what their children are saying or concealing on their computer. Parents need to install filters to prevent the annoying sexually explicit pop-ups happening, or your children being seduced by pornographic words or pictures. Australian psychologist, Dr. Michael Carr-Gregg, says that computers can lure children into situations they are not equipped to handle. In talking about the Internet he calls it 'Cyberia', likening it to a new country and describes cyber kids as early settlers. He says the net allows them to enter a dangerous world with 'spooky alleys and scary places'. He asks, "If you had a seven-year-old would you dump him in a red-light district in Amsterdam?" It may sound extreme, but he insists that computers can seriously threaten a child's psychological development.

Here are some suggestions. Award your children 12 half hour tokens on a Sunday night each week. Each child can use these tokens on the computer, watching TV, talking on the phone, or playing with a Play Station or Nintendo.

Parents may use a timer and strictly adhere to the time. Siblings tend to 'spill the beans' on each other if there is any cheating.

Secondly, install the computer in a communal area and make sure you look over your child's shoulder from time to time. Thirdly, if you allow your child to establish a profile page on a social networking site, then check it regularly to ensure personal safety issues are not being violated. Fourthly, turn off all media equipment and insist that dinner is eaten at the table, and encourage communication. Lastly, ensure your children get outside as much as possible and maintain friendships where regular communication takes place and imaginations are fed.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.