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## What does a safe online experience mean for your child?

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As you plan for the approaching Christmas season — and the holiday gifts you'll be purchasing to your child's delight — it's important you take a moment to assess what exactly safety online means, before you buy.

### Online safety for kids

Contributed by Mary Kay Hoal

When we think of the word safe in the context of our children, other words that come to mind usually include secure and protected. When you apply the definition of those words to our children's online activities, they're pretty much meaningless — even if they still hold true as standards that you want for your children.

#### Why is that?

First, there is not an agreed-upon definition of what it means to be secure online, especially when it involves youth. In their daily lives, you probably make a conscious effort to keep them away from violence in video games and away from consuming inappropriate content on TV, but on the internet it's an entirely different ball game. Though software like McAfee or AVG can help block this content on your child's computer or smartphone, there's nothing that blocks it in apps and social networks like Instagram, Facebook, Ask.Fm or Tumblr where violent or inappropriate content can be created and shared.

If anything on the internet is secure, it's a webpage that has a secure web protocol. You've seen these webpages — they usually have https in the URL instead of http (the s representing "secure"). These pages are usually meant to protect credit card transactions or login information. Secure on a social network, however, doesn't really mean anything. Information that we share intentionally (like photos of our children or vacation plans) or information that we share without realizing how it's going to be used (like contact information and geographic location) can all put our privacy at risk.

Here's my point — the word secure has a very different definition online. What creates a safer experience for youth online is inclusive of the following.

- Education
- Healthy interaction
- Age-appropriate content
- Culture
- People
- Following The Rules

#### Education

Website operators and app providers should educate their users about the risks of over-sharing, for example. Some websites do this, but most do not — especially if the website/app in question was created for adults — regardless of whether or not they have plenty of known child users. Simple reminders or tips for safe sharing could make all the difference in the world for a young teen who isn't aware that what they put out there on the internet is public and permanent.

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### Healthy interaction

Just as extracurricular activities after school are a great way to keep kids out of trouble and involved with peers athletically and socially, healthy online activities are a great way to keep kids on websites and apps that are age-appropriate and safer for them to use. Social networks like Yoursphere offer a supportive online community that's filled with interaction and content from like-minded youth members that treat each other with kindness and respect. This is a great way to create a healthy foundation for your child's idea of a healthy social network, and ultimately set them on the right path when they graduate onto other online communities.

### Age-appropriate content

This one doesn't need much explaining. Sites that are intended for an older audience, like Facebook, will have content that's intended for an older audience, and vice versa. Inappropriate content can have a damaging effect on our child's perception of the world, let alone the internet, so it's critical that you introduce them to the right kind of websites from the outset and use the appropriate tools and software to block unwanted content on your computer.

### Culture

It's no secret that our children are a reflection of the way they are raised, but it's important not to underestimate the effect that online culture can have on them. Whether it's the YouTube videos that gain popularity because of outrageous behavior or Q&A forums like Ask.fm, online culture can greatly impact their perception of what's acceptable behavior and what isn't. That's why making sure your child is a part of a digital culture that models respect and positive interaction is critical.

### People

Kindness and respect go a long way online. "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all," holds even more weight online. Far too many communities allow their members to harass each other. As we've found on far too many sites and apps that youth use, a few can easily ruin it for many.

### Follow the rules

It's a mandate we parents repeat over and over again with our kids, no matter what their age — follow the rules. Simple rules exist on the majority of the world's sites and apps — you must be 13 years of age or older to download and use. The minute you allow your child or tween to use an app or join a site that requires them to be older than they are, you both undermine your own parenting by inadvertently making it OK to lie, and both you and your child have immediately put their online safety and privacy at risk.

There are a number of websites and apps like Yoursphere that are built with your child and teen's best interests in mind. They don't require anyone to break the rules or undermine your parenting. Check out CommonsenseMedia.org to learn more.

### About the author:

Mary Kay Hoal is a nationally recognized expert on family and children's social media and online safety. She is the founder and president of Yoursphere Media Inc., which focuses on the family and publishes the social network for youth Yoursphere.com — sign your kids up today! Mary Kay is a mother of five and also offers parents internet-safety information at YoursphereForParents.com. She has been profiled on CNN, BBC, E!, Fox & Friends, TIME, Lifetime TV and many others. Mary Kay is a contributor to ABC's 20/20 as their family internet-safety expert. For more information visit [www.marykayhoal.com](http://www.marykayhoal.com).



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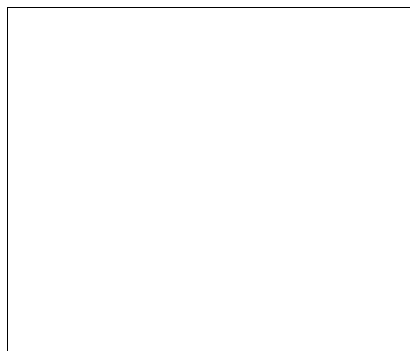
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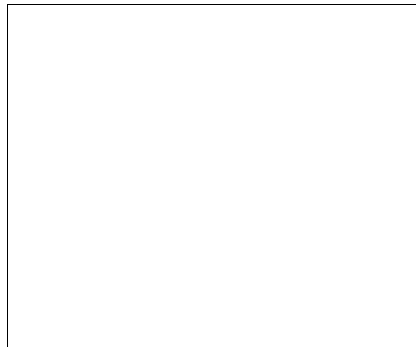
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