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## Call of the web

### With more children on the Internet, online safety is a major concern and parents must take proactive steps, writes Meera Murugesan

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IT's an undeniable fact that more children are online these days. With school closure and virtual classes, online activity has drastically increased. Coupled with the fact that outdoor play is restricted, digital devices are becoming new playmates.

My 8-year-old is allowed one hour of screen time everyday, provided she finishes her homework.

Unfortunately, I made the mistake of not actively supervising the content she was viewing, until she started asking me strange questions about death and murder.

I eventually realised that she had been watching distorted versions of popular cartoons like Peppa Pig and Frozen, which popped up on her YouTube screen. Given her age, she could not tell the difference from the original. These cartoons had inappropriate themes for children and dark storylines but were using familiar characters. I have since had a conversation with her about the need to avoid such content and have installed a software to block them. supervision and monitoring are some aspects of keeping kids safe online and it's more important now, given the increase in screen time.

Research by global cyber security company Kaspersky reveals that between March and May this year, 47 percent to 51 percent of Malaysian kids spent most of their time online, searching for learning materials related to their online classes.

Kaspersky southeast Asia general manager Yeo siang Tiong says it is a good sign that kids in Malaysia are using technology in a productive way. "Our study also revealed that parents fear for their children's online safety, but are not putting in time to talk about it."

#### Safe internet presence

Early Childhood Care and Education Council Malaysia founding president Datuk Dr Chiam Heng Keng says with increased screen time and more kids having access to digital devices, it's even more important that they are taught how to navigate the Internet safely. Parents cannot keep their children in a bubble, she adds. They have to teach them about the risks and how to handle them. When children receive their gadgets, the first thing parents should do is to have a discussion on safety, explains Chiam. Take the time to go through the programmes, applications or games which your child commonly use and teach them to evaluate the content. During this evaluation, teach your child why certain content is appropriate and others are not, what's permissible behaviour online and what's not.

For example, explain why they should not be talking to strangers online or giving out names and addresses. "Parents must build trust too. The child must believe that his parents are looking out for him and not just wanting to kill his fun." By viewing content together and evaluating it with your children, you are laying down safe behaviour that will be carried into adolescence, when they may be exposed to all kinds of risky content, adds Chiam.

“Help your children internalise this evaluation process, because once they do it, whenever they view any app or play any game online, this evaluation becomes automatic.” Parents also need to set a good example in terms of Internet use and practise what they preach.

### **Encourage Communication**

It’s also important to encourage communication. Listen to your children, pay attention to what they’re saying and encourage them to come to you if they encounter anything disturbing on the Internet. Chiam explains that with increased screen time and everyone cooped up in doors, conflict is bound to happen.

Children will likely argue when asked to put away their devices or fight with siblings over device or gadget use. A good relationship between the child and parent can help minimise this conflict. TV host actor, entrepreneur and father of three Nazrudin Habibur Rahman says while boundaries are important, it’s also necessary to strike a balance on this issue.

“Parents who are completely unfamiliar with video games may be tempted to ban their children from playing. However, banning is not the healthiest solution because children may have peers who play games at school and not allowing them to participate may make them feel like outcasts. “There should be check and balance,” he says. To achieve this balance, he has installed safety nets such as Kaspersky safe Kids.

He says his family practises a policy of no smart phones during meal times and having conversations related to cyber safety. He also talks to his kids about sexual predators online and how to identify “bad sentences” or inappropriate conversation. “We are no experts in this area, but we will learn together,” he adds.

Pikom (the National Tech Association of Malaysia) chief executive officer Ong Kian Yew says there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to online safety.

He adds that there is nothing wrong in introducing technology to children at a young age. However, this doesn’t mean there are no boundaries. Parents should set boundaries and these boundaries can be adjusted as children grow older and more responsible. More importantly, explain to kids why these boundaries are needed. This helps build trust with children.