



Chances are, if your child isn't at school or sleeping, he or she is online.

According to a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, American youth ages 8 to 18 spend nearly eight hours a day online. Other studies have shown that 75 percent of children ages 3 and older are using the Internet.

While much of this time is likely spent doing harmless activities such as IMing with friends, watching videos on YouTube or posting on Facebook, children may be exposed to inappropriate content, viruses and other risks. Sixty-five percent of children ages 11 to 16 report having received an inappropriate e-mail, IM or text within the last six months.

It's not practical to keep kids off-line entirely, so it's important for parents to prepare their children for a digital future. That means developing rules and guidelines that both the parent and child can embrace.

Monica Vila, also known as "The Online Mom," has spent the last 15 years focused on consumer technology and empowering families to make good decisions regarding their use of technology. Vila advises parents to stay in touch with their children, keep communication open and, when necessary, monitor online activity.

- Be informed. Find out what your children like to do online, which sites they like to visit and which games they play. Spend time together online.

- Start a dialogue. Talk to your child about online safety and be specific about your concerns. Let him know there are safe and unsafe websites, just as there are safe and unsafe places to go in the real world.

- Install a top-rated suite of parental controls to protect your home computers and monitor your child's use. Include blocking features to restrict or filter inappropriate content, time-management controls to limit screen time, and tools to monitor your child's communications. Let your child know when you install parental controls – trust is the foundation of good decision making.

- Protect personal information. Teach your children to respect personal information, both their own and others'. Teach them never to share passwords, phone numbers, addresses or other personal info.

- Click smart. Teach your children not to open files or click on links unless they are from a trusted source. Talk about the dangers of malware and how viruses can harm your computer.