At what age should parents begin to talk with their child about using the Internet responsibly and safely?

Even a child as young as 4 or 5 years old can understand the concept that there are websites that Mommy and Daddy like and websites that Mommy and Daddy don’t like. Identity four or five websites the child would like to go to and make a big icon on the desktop for each. That way, your child can enter these sites without risking typing in the addresses and possibly making a mistake and ending up in the wrong place. You can do this as soon as your child is old enough to start clicking the mouse with some confidence and you find yourself going in and out of the room while your child uses the computer.

After that first conversation about Internet safety, how often should a parent bring up the topic?

At least once a year. But this should be an ongoing discussion. Also, you’ll want to do it in a way that’s productive. You don’t ever want to have a conversation with your children where they’ve tuned you out. But at the same time, the Internet is such a pervasive part of your child’s life that they generally do want to know that they’re safe and that you’ll support and help them.

Parents can start the conversation with their children by asking them questions about what they do online. Do this in a light, no confrontational way. There are really five basic questions:

- What are your friends doing online?
- What are the coolest or newest websites?
- Will you show me your favorite sites?
- Do you know anyone who has been cyber bullied?
- When you’ve been online, have you ever seen anything weird or that made you feel uncomfortable?

Figure out which of these questions are most important to you and start with those. It’s perfectly OK to ask just one question. For example, while you’re in the car and you’re driving to soccer practice, ask “What are the coolest websites these days?” That way you’re being conversational, not interrogational.

What if I’m uncomfortable with the Internet and computers? How can I talk with my child about what he does online when I know so little about it?

All of the authority you have as a parent still holds when it comes to the Internet. You still get to set the rules and say that your child needs to follow them in order to have access to the Internet.
But we do recommend that you ask your child to teach you about the Internet. If you don’t know much about social networking and your child does, ask her to show you how to set up an account. Say to your child, “I want to make sure my account is safe and private and secure; can you show me how to do that?” By asking for your child’s help, you’re giving her the opportunity to educate you. That can be very empowering to your child and a great way to deepen your bond.

Wouldn’t it be easier to just keep our kids away from the Internet for as long as we can get away with it?

That’s assuming that the Internet is somehow inherently bad. And I disagree with that. I think that people are inherently good but some people aren’t, and the Internet has both.

Parents who fear the Internet should look at it the way our children do: It’s just part of life. It’s like air. We don’t want to teach our children to fear air. And keeping our children away from the Internet puts them at such a disadvantage. Even elementary-school-age activities like scouting have created these very rich online environments where kids can learn about their badges, their requirements. I think it would be very foolish to take a negative approach to something kids don’t view as optional at all.

I think most kids are just being kids when it comes to the Internet. But parents have to be in the room virtually. If they aren’t, it’s like sending our kids to school and taking away the teachers, the principal, the janitorial staff, and the security people and expecting our kids not to get into trouble. Parents have to stay in touch with their children’s online lives. That means asking your kids what they’re doing online and asking more than once.