KIDS SAFETY

When parents are asked about our major concerns raising our children, the first idea that comes to mind is 'safety'. We want our children to be safe at school, while crossing the street, we want them to stay away from strangers, we even start baby-proofing our homes with the trendiest gadgets in town before the baby is born. We also want our children to feel safe in their bodies, we take them from doctor appointments to dentist appointments, to make sure they are healthy and yet again, safe. Bottom line, we do everything in our power to keep our little ones safe from harm, but why don't we take the same precautions when it comes to internet safety?

The internet can be the source of valuable and accessible information. It is also considered to be one of the most effective means of communication and a great platform to exchange ideas and thoughts. That isn't to say it doesn't pose any risks, but those risks can be minimized by being aware of those risks and taking the right precautions.

A recent study conducted in 2016 by the Ministry of Social Affairs, The Higher Council for Childhood and SMEX, a local Lebanese NGO, showed that 40% of the 157 youths observed between age of 14 and 22, share their school and home address and nearly 33% share their phone number online.

Less than 13% have strict privacy settings set up on their devices and/or use 2-step verification for their online accounts. Results also show that 61.79% of male participants and 33.33% of female participants have received offensive or hurtful pictures. 75.31% of male participants and 61.34% of female participants have had their accounts hacked. When asked if they were ever blackmailed or threatened by violence, 44.45% of male participants and 16% of female participants said yes. Another alarming result shows that 37.03% of male participants and 18.67% of female participants were bullied or sexually harassed online.

When talking about child sexual abuse, we imagine the predator sitting in a dark gloomy room, or behind a tree next to a school or playground, but the reality is that predators are everywhere. They do not look funny, smell funny, talk or walk funny. They look just like you and me and they too, have access to the internet, which has become the biggest playground ever created for both children and adults.

As parents, we are the core reference and the source of our children's inner-compass, and this comes with a great deal of responsibility. Our children come to us when they feel sick, when they hurt themselves and when they are confused or lost.

Why wouldn't they do the same when it comes to internet safety? The reality is that our children are at as much of a risk when taking candy from strangers, as they are accepting a friend request from someone they do not know. Our children are at risk if they are not aware of the dangers they could encounter online and if we do not teach them practical tools to protect themselves from the vast online world.

In order to do so, we need to educate ourselves on the dangers of the internet and become as knowledgeable as our children when it comes to its use.

These are only some of the risks our children face online every day:

- Cyberbullying

- Threats of violence

- Receipt of unwanted content

- Receipt of hateful comments or pictures

- Identity theft

- Account hacking

- Credit card number theft

Our children are more vulnerable to these risks when they:
- Share personal information
- Accept friend requests or interact with strangers online
- Visit X-rated or pornographic sites
- Meet with someone they met online

There are many measures we can take when talking to our children about online safety. First, it is important to establish trust and an open flow of communication with our children. If they feel threatened by our questions, they are more likely to withdraw and be unresponsive to what we have to say.

We need to reassure them and encourage them to come to us when they see 'new' things on the internet or have questions. It is also important not to over-react when our children inform us they have been talking to strangers online.

Although parental tips on online safety may vary depending on the age of our children, here are some practical tips we can start implementing at home today:

- If your children are under 15 years-old, place the home computer or laptop in a shared space, such as the living room.

- Become more aware of your children's online activity; ask your children if any stranger has tried contacting them, asked for their personal information or pictures.

- Have an open discussion with your children regarding their online encounters: has anyone or anything made them feel uncomfortable? Has anyone tried to talk to them about inappropriate topics? Has anyone offered to send them gifts or goodies?

- If your children are under 12 years old, become familiar with their passwords and account details.
- Teach your children how to use the privacy settings of every application they use.

- Ask your children about newly friended people's background.
- Explain that people met on social media might not be who they say they are.

- Explain that there is no going back when posting content on the internet, and that they should be aware of the type of content they post.

- Look up possible security measures on websites your children visit or the social media channels they use.

- Contact your children's school to ensure that any projects, art, or photos placed on the school website are only accessible by password.

- Make sure that your children are not posting inappropriate content that could lure potential predators.

- Use child-friendly versions of existing apps such as Google's Kiddle, YouTube's YouTube Kids or Messenger's Messenger Kids app.

- Discuss rules and guidelines for the use of webcams on laptops or home computers.

- Teach your children never to post about an event they attend because this could make it easier for predators to track them.

- Teach your children how to respond to cyberbullies; no one has the right to intimidate them or make them feel unworthy. They should keep all the evidence they can find and submit them on himaya's e-helpline by visiting our website.

To know more about online safety, request help or express a concern regarding your children's online safety, contact himaya by sending us an email at ehelpline@himaya.org.
If you suspect abuse, give us a call 03414964

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Pour l'innocence en danger