Internet Safety Night Discussion Starters

Internet safety is such a hot topic among parents that you're likely to find that your audience doesn't need much prodding to open up about their concerns. Here are some questions to get the ball rolling.

For parents of younger school-age children:

1. How old was your child when he or she first went on the computer? Let's see a show of hands—7? 6? 5? 4? 3? 2? 1? What were your child's favorite games to play on the computer when he or she was very young?

2. How old was your child when he or she first used the Internet? 8? 7? 6? 5? 4? 3? Younger? Can anyone tell me how they felt when their child first went on the Internet?

3. How many use parental controls on your Web browser? How many have installed special monitoring and filtering software to keep your child from viewing unwanted content? Tell us about your experiences with monitoring software.

4. Who here has children who go on virtual worlds like Club Penguin or Webkinz? How many of you have played the games to see what they're like? Can you tell us how you felt about it? What does your child like best about these games? Is there anything about these games that concerns you? If so, what?

5. Has your child ever entered a contest online without asking you first? If your child needed your personal information to enter a contest or get a "free" download, would you give it to him?

6. Has your child asked you for their own email address or cell phone? How did you respond?

For parents of older school-age children:

1. Has anyone here tonight ever had this happen to you—you walk into the room where your child is on the computer, and immediately he X's out of whatever it is he's been doing? Do any of you have any ideas what your child might be doing when he X's out? Thinking back to when you were a teenager, did you ever do the equivalent of X'ing out of a screen? If so, what? (Answers might include changing the subject when talking with a friend, lowering your voice to a whisper while on the phone, shoving a prohibited magazine under the mattress.)

2. How many of you have a child with an email address? How many have a child with an instant messaging account? What about a cell phone? Or a smart phone? Which do you think your child uses the most? How do you communicate with your child? If anyone here regularly text messages their child, can you tell us what that's like and how you feel about that? Of those whose children have a smart phone, do you ever check their phones to see what apps they've downloaded? Have you set parental controls on their phones?

3. Of those whose children use instant messaging, have you ever watched them IM their friends? What do you estimate is the maximum number of conversations they've juggled at once? Does anyone have a child who got into a fight with a friend online? Can you talk about what that was like and how the fight was resolved?

4. Show of hands: How many of you have a child with a Facebook or other social networking profile? Of those, whose children are younger than 13? Do you think it's OK to allow a child younger than 13 on Facebook? If so, why? Who here has their own account on Facebook or another social networking site? How many of you have seen your child's profile or are on your child's "friends" list? Do any of you think it's OK for kids to deny their parents access to their profiles? Please tell us why you think that way. Have you reviewed privacy settings with your child? Do you keep up to date yourself with changes in privacy settings?

5. Do any of your children use sites that allow them to download copyrighted material like music or movies without paying for them? If so, how do you feel about this? Should everything on the Internet be available for free? What are some of the risks of downloading content illegally?