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Parents need to use common sense when it comes to their kids and the Internet

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MONTREAL — Online safety expert Debbie Gordon says common sense is a parent's best guide when it comes to navigating the complex and sometimes unfamiliar terrain of the Internet.

Gordon has been speaking to children, parents and teachers about the Internet for the last six years, and says parents are doing a better job with the Internet than when she first started speaking publicly.

But they still have some homework to do when it comes supervising their kids online, Gordon said.

"Parents say, 'Well, I know about Facebook so I am OK,'" she said of the popular social networking site allowing users to share information with family and friends. "They typically don't understand how deep and wide this highway runs."

She knows they're already juggling a lot with work, home and children, and says it's even more complicated with the added duty of trying to be a cyber parent.

If parents are overwhelmed by the Internet, she suggests asking other parents for help, renting video games to see if they are acceptable or even hiring a teenager to help them.

Gordon said parents also need to talk about the Internet with their children, surf websites with their kids and establish ground rules. It also means putting the computer in a place where its use can be monitored.

"So much of what goes on the Internet is about parenting and not necessarily understanding technology," she said.

"It is really about taking the common sense that you have applied in the off-line space about when a child has to call home, where they can go, what they're allowed to do, and it's transferring that to the online space. We've got that common sense as parents, it's just extending it."

Gordon is also managing director of Mediacs, an organization that promotes media and cyber literacy in schools. She answers questions about the digital world in a column on Sympatico/MSN and has written for a number of publications including Today's Parent and Owl.

"Our job is so much more difficult than the job our parents had," said Gordon, the mother of two teens.

"They worried about the television and they worried about the telephone. Our lives are so much more complicated than that and being an Internet parent is really a challenging job."

She said parents are sometimes afraid to impose boundaries when it comes to the Internet.

"We don't want our child to be at a disadvantage vis-a-vis their friends. We want to give them those opportunities and we don't want to give them angst in the home."

Gordon said parents need to be aware their children could be posting too much personal information on sites, downloading viruses when they share files with friends, or having sites they visit tracked by companies with something called a cookie on their Internet browser.

They should also use parental control software to decide on appropriate content, especially

for younger children, Gordon said. And they should talk about cyberbullying and set ground rules for things such as chat rooms and meeting people on the Internet, she added.

Her biggest concern for kids surfing the Internet is that they're innocent and trusting and "in some cases have figured out how to lie their way onto a website" if they don't meet the age requirement.

Junior high school principal Ted Vine said while students have the ability to surf the Net, they don't always have the necessary critical thinking and that means they need their parents' guidance.

"With the Internet, 80 per cent of it is going to be parenting and 20 per cent of it is going to be your understanding of it," said Vine, principal of Jack Miner Senior Public School in Scarborough, Ont.

Parents need to do their research, just like they would check out any other activities their children are involved in, he added.

"As a parent it's your job to do your best to protect them when they're on it and that means getting involved to the point where you parent when they are on the Internet."

Lynn Hargrove, of antivirus maker Symantec Canada Corp., said a lot of moms and dads aren't using parental control software and other layers of protection.

"It's parents' responsibility to make sure their PC is safe right from the get-go that their child is using," said Hargrove, director of consumer solutions.

Symantec is the maker of the Norton360 AntiVirus software product.

Parents also need to make sure there's a level of security in place if their kids are buying online, Hargrove said.

She said parents and children need to be aware that criminal activity is on the rise on the Internet and identity theft can happen, for example, through e-mails designed to fraudulently acquire personal information.