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How can I keep my kid safe online?

FAMILY/KIDS, NEWS, PRIVACY, RIGHTS

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By [Brette Sember](#)

There's no question your kids are comfortable online, but are they safe?

Well, there's good news and bad. The good: federal laws provide some protections for children younger than 13. The bad news: these safeguards probably don't do what you were hoping for.

Children's online privacy law

The [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act \(COPPA\)](#) applies to commercial sites and services that are directed at kids under age 13 and which collect the children's personal information. It also applies to sites for general audiences that know they are collecting info from kids. But the law doesn't require website owners to actually investigate whether kids are using their site, and if a site asks users to enter their age, it is not responsible if the child lies.

The law does require sites that fall under its purview to post a [privacy](#) policy (which among other things, describes the type of information it collects), give parents notice, and get consent from the parent before collecting information about the child. Moreover, the policy must describe how the site collects and uses the information, and it has to provide parents with information on how to contact the site as well. If you need to file a complaint about a website abusing this law, contact the [FTC](#).

Keep in mind that the protections provided by COPPA are limited. While this law requires websites to get your permission to gather information about your child, it does not control the content or interaction that occurs on the site. It is not a safety measure for kids—rather, it is intended to provide privacy and give notice to parents; nothing more.

Facebook and kids

Millions of children under age 13 have [Facebook accounts](#), even though the site specifically restricts users to those over this age. This means either children are lying about their age, or parents are assisting kids in lying about their age to obtain access to the site.

If you allow your underage child on Facebook, it's essential that you monitor what's happening online and talk about online safety with your daughter or son. Facebook isn't liable if your child lies to get on.

Stopping spam

Spam is a headache for adults, but can be potentially dangerous for kids, who may not know how to spot suspicious email (and many adults don't either). The best way to deal with spam in your child's account is to use a spam filter, which will reduce but not necessarily eliminate the receipt of unsolicited emails.

There is also a law called [CAN-SPAM](#), which requires that any sexually explicit material in a commercial email be labelled as such in the subject line. You can then flag this wording in your spam filter. These emails must also have an opening page that allows the user to opt out and which functions like a plain brown wrapper, concealing any graphic material.

Filtering is your best option

While these laws provide some protection, the best way to keep your kids safe online is to be hands on. Install Internet filters and parental controls. From time to time, sit with your children when they're online, so you can talk about safety and things to be wary of.

And don't forget about computer use at friends' homes. Your child may spend a lot of time in other homes where there's likely Internet access. Talk with other parents about the kind of supervision and monitoring in their homes before you allow your child to visit.

Schools and libraries that want to receive federal funding must install filters on their computers under the [Children's Internet Protection Act \(CIPA\)](#), so you can feel comfortable that your child is protected when at school or at the public library.

The take-away for single mothers is that while there are some laws that control what happens online, the best way to protect your child is to be actively involved in his or her online use and to set up filters and parental controls that give you peace of mind.

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[Brette Sember](#) is a former attorney and author of more than 40 books, including *The Divorce Organizer & Planner*, *The Complete Divorce*, *How to Parent with Your Ex*, *The Essential Supervisor's Handbook*, *The Complete Credit Repair Kit*, *The Original Muffin Tin Cookbook*, and *The Gluten-Free Guide to Travel*. She writes often about law, parenting, food, travel, health, and more. She blogs at [PuttingItAllOnTheTable.com](#).

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