



Must-Have Apps for Child Safety

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Technology can be either our best friend or our worst nightmare when it comes to our kids. Every day parents unwittingly allow online dangers into their home that can rob a child of self-esteem, innocence — and in the worst cases, their life.

“Parents need to realize that to kids, the Internet is a sort of city — one that parents don’t spend a lot of time in,” tech genius Walter O’Brien told LifeZette. “Adults don’t know this ‘city,’ so they don’t understand it for what it is,” he said. “Instagram is a city, Facebook is a city, video games are a city — there are bad people in them, but the cities are very real to kids.”

O’Brien is founder and CEO of Scorpion Computer Services, Inc., and the executive producer of the CBS drama “Scorpion,” whose main character is based on O’Brien himself.

The cluelessness of parents when it comes to the Internet is, in part, a generational problem, said O’Brien. Kids have often surpassed their parents in technical ability, leaving their parents at a disadvantage.

“Kids are smart,” he said. “They will get around a protective firewall, or ask another kid how to get around it, or ask Google how to get around it. That’s why along with online safety measures, it’s very important to teach your kids good judgment, that anyone can be pretending to be anyone on the Internet, and about half of what they read on the Internet isn’t true. Teach common sense, and don’t let them get sucked into thinking they have a new friend just because someone ‘nice’ on the Internet wants their picture.”

Every day a news report surfaces related to the dangers posed by the Internet. This week from Australia came the startling report that there are more Australian middle school kids on Tinder than there are adults over age 35. Young kids are using the hook-up app to boost their popularity with their trusting parents none the wiser, the Courier Mail reported.

In Montana this week, Belgrade police detectives are investigating reports of predators, most adult males, using the popular Kik messenger app to target middle school-aged children. The predators are asking children to send inappropriate messages and photos.

Technology can work for us if we take the time to apply the right types of filters to the digital devices our kids use — paired with a heaping dose of common sense that O'Brien advocates.

Below are must-have apps to consider downloading if you have kids:

FBI Child ID: Download this app right away in the unlikely event you ever truly need it. It allows you to store photos and other vital information about each of your children.

Sex Offender Search: You will always be aware of who lives in or near your neighborhood with this app. Knowledge is power when it comes to knowing where the bad guys live.

Near Parent: This app works for parents who want their kids to check in periodically. If your child needs help and you aren't available, a request is sent to adults chosen by you. Violent weather notifications are also available on this app.

Norton Online Family: This allows parents to monitor their kids' web browsing, Internet searches and social media activity. Time on the computer can also be limited with this app.

McGruff Safeguard Browser: Limit your children's access to pornography and gambling sites. A daily summary of kids' browsing history is available as well.

SecuraFone: This app uses a smartphone's GPS to locate your kids, and also find out how fast they are driving. You can also receive an alert if your child travels beyond a certain area.

Icam: Keep an eye on your kids when you aren't home. All you need is a webcam and a computer in the room you want to monitor.

For teens and young adults, technology can work in their favor, too, when the worst occurs. Apple's "SIRI" received an update in March after researchers discovered unacceptably unhelpful and "lackluster" responses to questions about sexual assault and other personal emergencies, wtop.com reported.

Now, if SIRI hears "I was raped" or "I am being abused," iPhone users are one click away from the National Sexual Assault Hotline. The language SIRI responds with has been subtly softened, as well. (Instead of saying, "You should reach out to someone," SIRI now responds, "You may want to reach out to someone.")

Another developer is keeping smartphone users who like to share photos safe with his app FotoSwipe. The new app allows users to share multiple photos and videos without sharing personal information. FotoSwipe, just a year old, has already been downloaded 2 million times by users around the world.

"Our main focus is quickly and safely sharing photos," FotoSwipe creator Sylvain Dufour told LifeZette. "In the traditional scenario, I would get your phone number or email to send photos to you from my smartphone, and then I would text or email them to you. With FotoSwipe, I don't need your phone number — using the app, I literally swipe the photos from my phone to yours. No contact information is exchanged, which is important; teens and young people are very friendly with strangers."

Users can also swipe unlimited photos and videos from their mobile devices directly to any personal computer, Mac or PC.

The bottom line? Take time to download safety apps that make sense for your life and your family. Combine these with a thorough explanation to your kids of who might be lurking on the Internet — and you're well on your way to a safer digital life.

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