Dear Brewer Island Parents,

The reality of today is that children are going on-line at earlier and earlier ages due to the availability of cellphones, tablets, and computers. What protections have you put in place to protect your innocent children from inadvertently stumbling into adult-content websites? **Following is some information that was forwarded to me by our District's Elementary School Counselor, Ms. Nasse, to help you reflect upon and put in place on-line parental controls to protect your children.** Please make some time to become informed and set-up internet controls to protect your children now, not after they have stumbled upon sites that are inappropriate for their viewing.

Sincerely,

Mr. John Cosmos

Ever wonder what many kids are looking for online? Hint: It's not the name of the 26th President. In fact, because kids use search engines like Google to explore, your kids' online queries may never show up when you <u>check their browser histories</u>. So how can you manage what you can't see?

Norton Family Online's Top 100 Searches of 2009

Luckily, Norton Family Online, a free family safety service that helps protect kids online and fosters dialogue between parents and children about their online activities, compiled an eye-opening list of the top 100 searches done by kids in 2009. Since they had access to more than 14.5 million queries by kids, we have total faith that the results are not only accurate, but also a great window for parents into the average kid's online curiosities.

The Results:

Norton looked at the top 100 searches conducted by kids age 18 and under and also broke down results by age and gender. (http://onlinefamilyinfo.norton.com/articles/schools_out.php). Here are a few highlights:

- YouTube, Google, and Facebook topped the lists for both boys and girls.
- Searches for "sex" and "porn" came in at #4 and #5 for boys.
- For girls, "Taylor Swift" edged out "sex" for slot #4, dropping "sex" to #5.
- "Sex" was the #4 search for teens and tweens, but "porn" was the #4 most searched term for kids 7 and under.
- Teens love Swift, but tweens and kids under 7 sought out Michael Jackson.
- 35% of teens and 27% tweens spent their search time on music-related subjects like Chris Brown, Rihanna, and Lady Gaga.
- Kids under 7 spent most of their time checking out sites like Limewire and Mininova -- sites that offer "free" but mostly illegal downloads.
- Social networking sites were in the top five of every age group. Facebook and MySpace for teens, and Club Penguin for both tweens and kids 7 and under.

Another useful sit for parents: www.commonsensemedia.org

What Parents Need to Know

This is our children's reality. Online connectivity has given them unprecedented access to information and entertainment. They live in a [24/7connected culture](#) where all they need to do is search for something, and it arrives -- often unfiltered and highly age inappropriate. Parents must extend parenting to their children's online lives and know the [Rules of the Road](#). We have to teach our kids how to use the powerful tools at their fingertips responsibly.

Here are a few important guidelines to help:

For Children Under 7

Consider using filters or [programs that restrict Internet access](#). There are excellent free programs like [OnlineFamily.Norton](#) (the author of the top 100 search results and a Common Sense partner) that help you stay in the know about what your kids are doing online.

Make sure that you're [using the safest search settings](#) possible, and block words you don't want kids searching for -- like "sex" and "porn" ("boobs" and "boobies" also made the top 1000).

Always be present when kids are online, and know where they're going -- especially on [YouTube](#), which has great stuff and not-so-great stuff.

Pick age -ppropriate sites: Use independent resources -- like ours at Common Sense Media -- to help [find entertaining but age-appropriate destinations](#). Make sure you search for and select the sites that your kids visit.

Teach your children the basics of safe Internet behavior. The sooner they learn to search safely, the better. Remember: They're building lifetime habits early. [Follow our simple, smart guidance from Common Sense.](#)

For 7- to 10-Year-Olds

Explain that Internet searching can be risky. It's totally age appropriate for an 8-year-old to be curious about the human body or "facts of life." But cyberspace doesn't distinguish between a 7-year-old's "curious" and a 27-year-old's "curious." Your kids are going to search for sex and porn. The best ways to manage this are to [be sure that browsers are set to "safe search" modes](#) and to keep the channels of communication open between you and your kids. You want your kids to feel safe coming to you if they find something upsetting. Even if you're temped to be angry with what they've found, we suggest that it's better for them to hear your guidance rather than try to make sense of something upsetting on their own.

Keep the computers in central locations. Your 8-year-old doesn't need wireless in her bedroom. If she's an 'average' kid, she's searching for sex, too.

Talk to your kids about legal versus illegal content: Kids may think that they'll be able to get programs for free, but nothing like that is truly free. Limewire and Mininova are two popular kid searches. The sites carry music and games and are full of illegal peer-to-peer and bit torrent downloads. And both sites are guaranteed to deliver more than illegal content: They're festering mines of spyware and malware and will crash your computers sooner or later.

Teach kids the basics about privacy and [good behavior in online worlds and social networks](#). Kids start off with [Club Penguin](#) but quickly move to other social networks with fewer controls over what can be said and what kind of information can be shared.

Address cyberbullying. It's a horrible but very real part of online life. [Make sure you know how to help your kids protect themselves.](#)

For Preteens (11-12)

Talk about the importance of protecting online privacy and reputation. This is when kids really start, so [they need to understand what's safe and appropriate to post.](#) Kids don't realize that their online social lives take place in front of more than their friends -- there's a vast invisible audience out there. And whatever they put online can last forever.

Have the pornography talk. How much detail you go into is up to you. But to ignore it is to let kids make sense of it on their own. We suggest explaining your values about sex and intimacy and distinguishing them from what kids will find on both amateur and professional pornography sites.

Look at the games they're playing. Lots of these games are really violent, and they also can be riddled with spyware and malware. [Violent games decrease empathy, along with other negative effects.](#)

Set up rules about music downloads. Nothing illegal. Ever.

Make sure your kids can figure out whether a site is credible or not. Have them ask the basic questions: Who's behind the site? What is their purpose? How can I tell whether the information is accurate?

Remind them that Internet cheating (like lifting a whole paragraph from a website for a research paper) is still [cheating.](#)

For Teens

Learn about Facebook. It's the center of kids' cyber social lives. [Make sure your kids set privacy settings](#) and that they really understand that whatever they post can be copied, pasted, and sent to thousands of people in an instant. Help them protect their privacy and their reputation.

Revisit the pornography discussion. Sexual curiosity is absolutely normal for a teenager. But pornography is something completely different. Each family will have different attitudes about sexuality, but no pornography is age appropriate for kids. That said, they're seeing it, it's up to parents to help kids understand *what* they're seeing.

Establish rules about online searching. Each family will have different tolerances. But teens generally need latitude in searching because of schoolwork. They also often search when no parents are around so they have lots of freedom of movement.

Above all, discuss the [Rules of the Road for digital life](#). Since the biggest issues that arise are inappropriate content, inappropriate communication, protecting privacy, and unsafe downloads, make sure to talk to your teens about your guidelines in each area.