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Teacher guides parents through cyber 'land'mines

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Parents know they can't always peer over their kids' shoulders. So they routinely trust the advice they've given over the years -- stuff like look both ways before you cross the street and don't accept gifts from strangers -- will keep their children safe and sound.



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Those are good rules for the real world, where highways are paved and you can look strangers in the eye.

But that's yesterday's world. And today's kids don't live there very much.

Today's kids are "digital natives" in a cyberspace land where highways are measured in gigahertz and strangers can track you from afar.

On the other hand, most parents are "digital immigrants" who, to continue the analogy, have just stumbled off the boat and are dazed and confused by this fast-paced environment.

It's a new world. And most parents don't realize the old rules no longer apply.

That's where John Grandmont comes in. Along with a slew of other experts around the continent, the London teacher and consultant has helped create a website -- www.nortellearnit.org -- that aims to arm parents, teachers and kids with the tools they need to survive and prosper in our computer-based communities.

"When our kids go out on a Friday night, we're pretty sure we've taught them what the pitfalls are and how they should behave under certain circumstances," says Grandmont. "But we should do the same with the Internet.

"We can't follow them around or look over their shoulders the whole time. But we do need to teach them about it."

Grandmont, who taught full time for about 15 years with the Thames Valley District school board and now teaches part time as a "long-term occasional" substitute, says most parents are in the dark when it comes to their kids' online activities.

"It's a totally different ball game for the kids of today," he says. "As parents, we see the computer as a tool. But this is a generation that sees it as an essential communication device."

While many parents assume their kids' online activities are essentially harmless, the reality may be darker. YouTube, for instance, is filled with more than just videos of silly stunts and funny gags.

"I dare you to type some kinky thing under the search code for Youtube and see what you come up with," says Grandmont. "This is a real powerful tool you have sitting in your den -- or heaven forbid, hidden away in your kid's bedroom."

Grandmont cites a study that showed one in four kids have been asked to meet a stranger they met online. And, he says, a recent survey revealed there are more than 180 million profiles on Facebook and MySpace -- sites filled with personal details.

"For the bad guys, that's easy pickings if the kids don't know what they're doing," says Grandmont.

Grandmont has helped create some of the cyber safety lessons on the new website, which is rife with links and resources. Aimed at teachers, parents and students, the site also features basic tips -- including videos about spam and a crossword puzzle about copyright concerns -- that any family with a computer would benefit from.

"That information literacy is more important than ever," says Michael Connet, the Washington, D.C.-based chief academic officer for Nortel LearnIT. "We can make it palatable by presenting it in the technology the kids are drawn to.

"It's not to scare teachers and kids, but . . . the kids need to be aware that something's going on behind the activity they're doing, so they can consider the ramifications."

Many of the lessons -- such as never create an offensive online identity since it may be stored and read by a future employer, and don't respond to SMS/text messages on a cellphone unless you know who the sender is -- simply didn't exist 10 years ago.

But that's no excuse for parents and teachers.

"You have a responsibility as a parent to educate yourself," says Grandmont. "You also have a responsibility to work with your kids to make sure they understand what they're doing."