

A LETTER TO FAMILIES ABOUT ONLINE ADVERTISING, PRIVACY, AND IDENTITY THEFT



Your son or daughter is taking part in classroom lessons from the CyberSmart! Student Curriculum. He or she is learning that the Internet is a powerful tool for researching, communicating, and sharing ideas.

On many Internet sites, distinctions between information and advertising are often blurred. Many commercial Web sites offer engaging entertainment and rewards for young visitors in exchange for information about them. Even sites offering homework help may display ads and collect information.

An important skill for students to learn is being able to recognize commercial information. Differentiating commercial information from other online content is a first step toward making sure students know how to do effective research and use reliable sources while protecting their privacy and the privacy of their family.

What is online privacy?

Most people consider privacy a fundamental right and wish to be protected from intrusion by government, companies, and other individuals. Our expectation is that no one will collect information about us—private identity information or what we say and where we go—without our permission.

When you go online, information in your e-mails is stored by companies that provide e-mail service. When you look online at products and services, shopping sites keep track of the items you have viewed.

Marketers can collect information about you when you open their messages—even if you don't click on any links. The only way to know what is collected is to carefully read a site's privacy policy.

How does the U.S. government protect children's privacy online?

Congress passed the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act in October 1998. This law requires Web site owners to help protect the privacy of children age 13 and younger in several ways, including by posting a privacy policy. The Federal Trade Commission has a set of rules to be followed in implementing the law.

What is online identity theft?

Identity theft is a crime in which someone uses your private identity information—such as a Social Security number—without your permission to rent apartments, take out bank loans, open credit card accounts, or obtain a driver's license. Children, teens, and adults are all targets of this type of fraud. Online identity theft occurs when the thief gains access to private identity information stored on computers or by using the Internet to trick victims into revealing their information. For example, in "phishing" schemes, e-mails that appear to be from trusted companies ask victims to click on a link or call a phone number to verify account numbers.

Here's what we teach, at age-appropriate levels, about online advertising, privacy, and identity theft:

- Many Web sites are intended to sell, advertise, or promote products or services.
- Commercial sites may collect information about visitors.
- All children's Web sites should have privacy policies that clearly explain how and why they collect information about visitors age 13 and under.

Here's what families can do:

- As you explore Web sites with your younger children, play "find the ad."
- Have your older children show you some of their favorite sites and discuss whether, and how, products are promoted there.
- Read the privacy policies at children's Web sites and make sure you are comfortable with what they say, and the information they collect, before giving your child permission to visit the sites.
- Look for the TRUSTe® Privacy Seal for Kids and the Kid's Privacy BBBOnLine® seal, identifying children's sites that are certified to protect the privacy of kids under 13.
- If you think your family has been the target of identity theft or other online fraud, contact the [Federal Trade Commission](http://www.ftc.gov) (www.ftc.gov) to learn what to do.