

PARENT CORNER

Promoting Healthy Computer Habits for Kids

By Patricia von Oelhoffen

Children often seem to know more about technology than their parents and may even be the first in their families to use new media in this era of ever-changing technologies. We all recognize the positive benefits and opportunities our children can experience through access to computers and the Internet. But what about potential health and safety hazards? Parents should be mindful of areas ranging from what is safe and appropriate for children browsing the Internet to technology-related injuries and damages.

Whether working on a school report, surfing the Internet, or

screen and larger, bolder typeface may also help.

• **Fingers, hands, and wrists:** Hands and wrists can become painful or numb, tingle, and lose sensation. Overuse can lead to repetitive motion disorders. Let fingers curve naturally, without much stretching or flexing. Keep wrists straight and level with lower arms without much bending. Use mouse pads with built-in wrist rests.

• **Poor posture:** Poor posture can cause neck and shoulder strain, back pain, sore wrists, eye fatigue, and general discomfort – correct posture provides comfort and circulation to the back, arms, legs, and neck. Take frequent rest breaks. Children can

stand, stretch, wiggle, sit on their knees, change position, and move around.

• **Chair:** To avoid upper and lower back pain, adjust furniture so that children sit high enough for their arms to bend slightly when typing or using a mouse. Place cushions or phone books on a non-adjustable chair. If feet do not touch the floor, use a footstool, cushions, phone books, or boxes to prevent feet from dangling and cutting off circulation.

• **Keyboard:** Because children should use only light pressure to avoid tiring their hands, child-sized or notebook key-

boards are recommended. Keep the keyboard level with the child's stomach to avoid reaching.

• **Monitor:** To avoid neck or back strain and aid vision, sit at least 2 to 2 1/2 feet from the monitor. Forehead height should correspond to the top of the monitor, so children can look slightly down at the text without leaning backward or forward to see the screen.

• **Mouse:** To prevent pain or injury to arms, wrists, and hands, avoid holding the mouse too tightly and using it for long stretches of time. The mouse is primarily built for adult hands, so try to find one for smaller hands and place it in easy reach.

You may want to place the "Guidelines for Children Online" that accompany this article next to the computer as a reminder.

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GUIDELINES for CHILDREN ONLINE

- NEVER sign onto the Internet until chores and homework are finished.
- NEVER spend more than ___ hours a day online.
- NEVER give out your name, address, telephone number, school, or other personal information.
- NEVER post pictures without a parent's approval.
- NEVER give out passwords.
- NEVER give credit card numbers.
- NEVER order products.
- NEVER go into areas that cost extra without parental permission.
- NEVER respond to someone you don't know.
- NEVER have a phone conversation with or meet in person someone met online unless your parents agree and accompany you.
- NEVER chat with people who use foul or vulgar language or make you uncomfortable.
- ALWAYS tell your parents or other adults you trust if you see something scary or hard to understand.
- ALWAYS follow rules about chat rooms.
- ALWAYS click "back" or "home" when you find yourself where you think you shouldn't be or in an "adults-only" place.
- ALWAYS follow rules about which games can be downloaded.

▷ Computer time should be limited when children are not doing well in school or if rules are abused.

playing computer games, children often spend many hours in front of a computer. Parental guidance can provide the know-how so that children can enjoy their computer experiences while avoiding the pitfalls. By demonstrating proper behavior and use, parents can emphasize the value of making good decisions about Internet content and set clear and common-sense guidelines. Just as parents tell children about risks or dangers they might encounter in life, they can alert and explain to them Internet risks and dangers as well as rewards and fun.

Parents can protect children from computer-related injuries and damages by observing and sharing with them the following safety tips.

• **Eyes:** To help avoid headaches, eyestrain, or visual problems, blink often; avoid staring at the screen; frequently look away from the monitor, especially when playing video games; take breaks to rest your eyes; and avoid excessive light, glare, or dimness. A glare