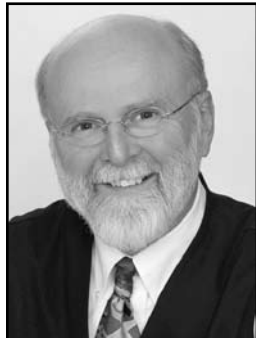


Navigating Digital Waters

By Michael Mann



Samuel Clemens loved the river and piloting steam boats. He took the pen name Mark Twain from his days on the river. The navigational term “Mark Twain” is an indicator of safe water: two fathoms or twelve feet deep. As a riverboat pilot he had to know all he could about the dangers of the river so that he could safely navigate his way and arrive successfully at his destination.

Navigation is the art of getting from one place to another, safely and efficiently. Whenever your children successfully find a friend’s house down the street or walk home from school on their own, they are using the tools of navigation. But what if your child found herself in a place she didn’t recognize? Would she know how to safely find her way home? What if that place she didn’t recognize was right in her bedroom?

The Internet is much like the river of Mark Twain’s day. Mark Twain’s river had sand bars, hidden logs or dead heads, shallow water, undertow, snakes and alligators. There were even pirates on the river. It was certainly not a place where we consciously let children play without first making sure they would be safe. While it is a wonderful source of many good things, the Internet, like the river, is fraught with danger as well.

The Danger on the Internet:

- Sexual predators
- Social networking sites like MySpace, and Face Book
- Video uploading sites like YouTube
- Pornography
- Cybersex computer games
- Internet bullying
- Commercial exploitation
- Dangerous information
- Hate information (up 70% to 373,000 sites)
- False information
- Internet addiction

Note: Social Networking and Video Uploading sites like MySpace and YouTube can be safe when handled right.

The Good News

Just like there are things we can do for our children to keep them safe in water, there are many things we can do to keep them safe in the digital waters.

The National Institute on Media and the Family lists these tips for safe navigation on the Internet:

- Keep the computer in a public area of your home. (This is the easiest and one of the most effective things you can do.)
- Discuss what information is private and shouldn’t be shared online.
- Limit time on the Internet as you would other screen time.
- Assure your kids that you respect privacy but need to be kept in the loop – ask who they are hanging out with online.
- Talk to your kids about “cyber-bullying.”
- Encourage your kids to talk to you if they see anything inappropriate.
- Trust but verify. Tell your kids you’ll be checking in.
- Remind your kids that people you meet on the Internet are strangers.
- Talk with children about what they are seeing and doing on the Internet.
- E-mailing personal information should only be done with adult’s permission
- Set clear “house rules” around the use of the Internet with consequences if those rules aren’t followed.
- Never arrange a meeting with someone from the Internet unless a parent is present.

Awareness Is Key

The FBI reports that at any given time there are more than 500,000 predators on the Internet trying to connect with our kids.

25% of children report receiving unwanted sexual material while on the Internet. One in five report being sexually solicited online and only 24% shared this with their parents. 89% of sexual solicitations are made through chat-rooms or instant messages.

We parents need to know where our kids are and who they are with, especially when they are surfing on the net. Like the river pilots of Mark Twain’s time, we are the pilots of our children’s lives.

We don’t need to become technological ex-



perts but we do need to become MediaWise. Check out www.mediawise.org. That’s the website for the National Institute on Media and the Family. You will find resources for parents like a tutorial for MySpace and YouTube and an Internet Safety series.

This isn’t as difficult as it may seem. The good news is that we parents have more power than we realize. Study after study shows that engaged, caring adults are more powerful than the dangers of the digital waters.

Lifeguard on Duty

When I was a kid, the local swimming pool was a place where kids could get fresh air, exercise and be with friends. One day I chose to play in the deep water before I knew how to swim. Lucky for me there was a lifeguard on duty. The pool would have been a daily disaster area if not for rules and lifeguards. These Internet waters need rules and lifeguards too. We need to be on duty for our kids.

As Dr. David Walsh, founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family, says, “The Internet offers both Promise and Peril.”

Like Mark Twain’s river, the Internet can be a marvelous place. Provided you know where the safe water is, are aware of the dangers and have a lifeguard on duty. ➤

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