Should my child be online?

This guide has been designed to help parents make informed decisions about Internet usage and age-appropriate electronic devices for their children.

Children engage predominately in several types of electronic activities:

- Messaging each other via computers or cell phones

- Playing games online

- Playing CD-based (not online) games

- Posting on social networking or blogging Web sites

Preschool ages

RECOMMENDED

- Non-electronic games are better for this age group
- CD-based games with no online component
- Avoid all online play and supervise all computer use

Children, ages 5-10

RECOMMENDED

- Online games with no chat capability or only pre-set chat comments
- CD-based games with no online components
- Investigate privacy and marketing issues with any game Web site
- Use software that permits you to track all computer use and supervise closely
- No messaging recommended
- No "freestyle" chat recommended

MASSACHUSETTS AGGRES

Preteens, ages 11-14

RECOMMENDED

- CD-Rom or "off-line" games

- Online games with pre-set chat or no chat

- Online games where chat is automatically "screened" for personal information (not permitting children to type their password)

- If you permit children to play online games with freestyle chat, be sure they understand safety rules and closely monitor their computer usage. Many children under age 14 cannot appreciate security concerns.

- Children under age 15 should not post on social networking sites with the exception of sites specifically geared for preteens

- No messaging recommended (see below: Am I depriving my child of a social life?)

Am I depriving my child of a social life?

Do children under age 15 need messaging for social inclusion?

If you don't permit a preteen to use messaging, are you depriving him or her of an important socialization opportunity? No matter what your child tells you, there are parents who do not permit preteens to message. If you can ban or limit messaging along with some of your child's friends the decision is easier.

In any case, it is imperative that parents understand the risks before permitting a preteen to use messaging. It's also important to understand that with most preteens, messaging frequently disintegrates into abusive and degrading exchanges. The social trauma associated with messaging may often outweigh the social trauma of feeling left out.

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No child left online

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A guide for parents

Age-appropriate limits on children's use of electronic communications and games