

Kid-Friendly, Kid-Safe

Help your child learn online navigation skills and surf safely with the help of fun, educational sites.

BY ERIN PERRY O'DONNELL

When Maggie Spano sits down to her computer, 5-year-old Emily likes to play copycat. "She sees me do e-mail and then opens a text editor and writes 'e-mails' like me," says Spano, a mother of two in suburban Kansas City, Mo.

Her 7-year-old son, Jack, is a bit more proficient, navigating websites like studyisland.com for schoolwork and lego.com for fun. Even in kindergarten, Spano says, he chose computer time over other free-time activities.

It's no surprise. This generation of kids is growing up watching Mom clicking away at the computer on a daily basis.

Ensuring the experience is both fun and safe for your child is vitally important. Share these activities and ideas to teach computer skills—and limits—while you have fun together.

Location, Location

The computer your kids use should be in a central place where you can supervise and help when needed. Margo Posnanski, a blogger

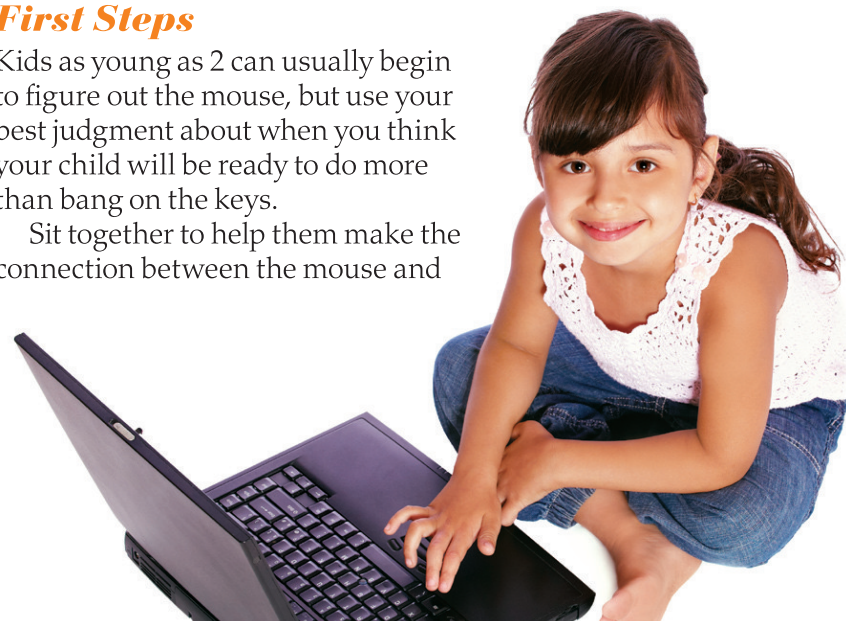
at mom2momKC.com, used to let her daughters, ages 5 and 9, use an older desktop PC in the basement of their home. But they were constantly asking for help, so Posnanski finally gave the girls access to her own computer just off the kitchen.

"It's a great location for me to monitor their activity, answer questions and still get things done," she says.

First Steps

Kids as young as 2 can usually begin to figure out the mouse, but use your best judgment about when you think your child will be ready to do more than bang on the keys.

Sit together to help them make the connection between the mouse and



SAFETY CHECK

There's not a monster hiding behind every mouse click.

Armed with basic knowledge, parents can make the Internet safer for kids to browse.

The best thing you can do is sit at the computer with your kids—but let them take the wheel.

"It's a bonding experience. It allows you, the guardian, to open the door to a discussion about safety in a very benign way, where you're not scaring them," says Nancy McBride, safety director for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The organization operates

NetSmartz, a website with games that teach kids in a fun way about protecting themselves online.

The main points to raise with children are things grown-ups may take for granted:

- Don't give out personal information, including your name, gender, age, address or phone number.
- Don't open e-mails or links from people you don't know.

- Always tell a trusted adult if anything you see online makes you feel sad, scared or confused.

Start setting limits on time on the computer when your kids are young. Take into consideration all of their screen time, including TV and video games, and determine how much of their day should be spent on electronics.

Some parents "bank" time to earn screen time. For example,

for every two hours kids spend on other activities, they can earn an hour of electronic entertainment.

If you're not the most tech-savvy parent, McBride says it's OK. Let your own life experience and judgment guide you in guiding your children through technology. "We don't want parents to feel diminished just because they're not whiz-bangs on the computer," she says.