3 Big Rules Your Kids Are Breaking Online

For those of us who grew up with dial-up modems, it can be hard to understand what the digital age is like for today's kids. Access to information is literally at their fingertips. But easy access reduces the time it takes to think through your actions -- and makes it easier to do not-so-great things. Like copying other people's work and calling it your own. Or downloading copyrighted music or movies illegally. Here are the top three online offenses -- and how to make sure your kid's online activities stay on the safe side.

Plagiarism and high-tech cheating

What it is: Copying someone else's work and calling it your own.

What's the big deal? Cheating is cheating, no matter whether it happens by text or a scrap of paper passed under a desk. Kids caught plagiarizing or cheating can face serious consequences at school and at home. And, most importantly, they're losing out on learning opportunities.

How to talk about it with your kid: Kids are so used to cutting and pasting; sharing links, photos, and text; and mixing it all up to create their own material that many don't think it's a problem to use stuff they find online in their own work. Make sure they understand that when they use something from the Internet, they have to credit the source -- it's never OK to copy something without saying where you got it.

Illegal downloads and uploads

What it is: Downloading or uploading copyrighted material like movies, TV episodes, or music through illegal sites.

What's the big deal? Not only is downloading and uploading copyrighted material unethical, it's also illegal. Under law, offenders can be punished with up to five years in jail and $250,000 in fines. And it's not like no one is watching: Large data transfers can send up a red flag to your Internet Service Provider. The company will contact you or turn off your Internet service if the amount of data going to your home computer appears suspicious.

How to talk about it with your kid: You can remind kids that somebody worked hard to create that song or that movie, and if they want to support their favourite artists or actors, they should respect their work. It's getting easier and cheaper to find music and other media legally, so do a little research together to find the best sources for enjoying favourite titles guilt-free. As for uploading -- there's a reason why Facebook is a multi-billion-dollar company: Kids love sharing their favourite stuff. But it's important to teach kids the difference between copyright infringement and "fair use." It's OK to use a portion of copyrighted material as part of a legitimate critique or a unique artistic endeavour that "transforms" the original work; it's not OK to upload someone else's copyrighted video or song in its entirety. Also, ask kids to weigh their desire to share something with their belief in fairness and honesty.

Underage social media

What it is: Lying about your age to get an account with Facebook or another social media site whose Terms of Service require users to be a certain age (usually 13) to join. Last year, *Consumer Reports* said there were 7.5 million Facebook users under 13. And a report released in 2011 by Microsoft said that 7 in 10 parents of underage Facebook users help their kids set up the accounts.

What's the big deal? While it's not illegal, lying about your age does violate the Terms of Service agreement users must agree to when they sign up. And when parents help kids lie online, they're setting a poor example about good digital behaviour. What's more, kids' privacy is at stake. Information that kids share on Facebook is used to target them with advertising that they might be too young to recognize for what it is.

How to talk about it with your kid: First, make sure you understand the reasons behind the age restrictions on sites like Facebook. Many parents believe the "no kids" rule is because the content on social networks can be too mature for kids. But the real reason for these age-based rules is because companies that allow underage kids to sign up are legally restricted from collecting certain information from them. Rather than create a more private environment for kids, Facebook and others choose to restrict access to those under 13. When many of your kid's friends are on Facebook, talking about "privacy" can be a hard sell. Pointing kids toward more age-appropriate sites can work, as can talking to other parents about their own rules around social networking. While kids might be upset when you tell them they can't join Facebook for a few more years, just think of the favour you're doing them by deferring social networking drama until they're more prepared to handle it.