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## Mother helps parents teach kids to surf the Web safely

By Colin Gustafson, STAFF WRITER

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Monica Vila's 10-year-old daughter had barely finished unwrapping her laptop computer for Christmas when her mom plucked it from her hands and got to work activating the safety features.

First came the parental controls on the hard drive. Then the Web filters and monitoring software. She even helped her daughter write rules for using the computer, such as when to report inappropriate content.

"You can allow your kid to be extremely creative with a laptop," Vila said "But if you are going to hand it over to them like it's some toy, that's the equivalent of tossing them into the water and expecting them to swim."

The Harrison, N.Y.-based child safety advocate will speak to Greenwich parents tonight about simple steps they can take to ensure their elementary-age kids behave safely and responsibly in a rapidly changing digital world.

### Gallery



Monica Vila Photo: Contributed Photo / Greenwich Time Contributed

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Her presentation, "Elementary Years Cyber Smarts," is geared to parents with kids in the primary grades who are becoming more immersed in the technologies already adopted by their older peers.

"This is a new horizon for a lot of parents," Old Greenwich mother **Maureen Bonanno** said. "We're all used to (hearing about the dangers of technology use) by middle- and high schoolers. But now elementary kids are using computers more than ever, and I think parents need to know where the problems can occur."

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Questions from parents run the gamut, Vila said. What age is too young for a cell phone? Should social-networking sites be off-limits? When is it OK to let them use a laptop in their room?

While there are often no hard-and-fast answers, a good rule of thumb for parents is to stay as up-to-date as possible on the technology their kids are using.

"My goal is to put parents in a frame of mind where they are ready for the future," Vila said. "Get them to realize that technology is no longer a choice. It is essential to embrace it to better guide their kids."

One of her chief concerns is making sure children are safe from inappropriate content online.

"A child can be two clicks away (on the Web) from watching bestiality -- the worst possible human behavior, so it's essential to do everything you can to protect your child online," Vila said.

Some precautions include keeping the computer in an accessible family room where a child's activity can be monitored, changing the user preferences on search engines like Google to limit the results that pop up and activating parental-control setting that are built into hard drives on most Macs and PC's. Parents also can use special software to filter Web content, restrict access to some sites, even limit the amount of time their kid spends online.

Beyond content controls, parents can also encourage their kids to follow many of the same common-sense rules online that apply in real life, such as "stranger danger."

Just as kids shouldn't talk to unfamiliar adults, they should also steer clear of unknown e-mail senders, social-networking "friends" and instant messenger "buddies."

While it is vital for parents to be aware of the dangers associated with modern technology and the Internet, it is also important to emphasize and take advantage of the positive side, she said.

Texting and e-mail, for instance, can be great ways to send an encouraging message. Web sites like Ning give parents a way to establish a dialogue with their kids by setting up closed, online social networks accessible only to approved friends and relatives. And nonviolent video games like "Guitar Hero" can be a good way for parents and kids to blow off steam together, according to Vila.

"There are all kinds of things that allow you to have quality time, and establish a bond," Vila said.

All parents of school-age kids in Greenwich are welcome to attend Vila's presentation at 7 tonight at [Old Greenwich School](#), 285 Sound Beach Ave.

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