Parental tips on helping kids avoid unsafe Internet sites

*Stump the PC Club is a free tech-advice column written by members of the **North Orange County Computer Club**, which has been in existence since 1976. Visit the club's site at noccc.org. And don't forget to stop by the Gadgetress' home for the PC Club, at ocregister.com/link/pcclub, to find out how to ask a question and read past answers.*

QUESTION: I have small children who occasionally click a link on the Internet that takes them to objectionable places. This embarrasses them and their friends. I can't always be around when they use the computer and would like some suggestions on available software or other methods for preventing this. *~Marci*

PC Club: The Internet continues to be a place where lots of bad stuff can happen to you, even if you are careful - and it's getting worse every day. There are many companies taking advantage of this situation and more then a few of them are unscrupulous. Some of these companies promise to protect you but actually put you in harm's way to entice you to buy their "protection" products. Always do your research prior to purchasing or installing their "free" software since you may be making matters worse.

There are several approaches to protecting a surfer from going to objectionable web sites. You can purchase and install programs such as Net Nanny, currently available at www.netnanny.com for $39.99 or Web Watcher, available at www.webwatchernow.com for $87. The latter program both controls where someone surfs and also monitors where they surf. This is intended to keep an eye on people or more accurately, to spy on them.
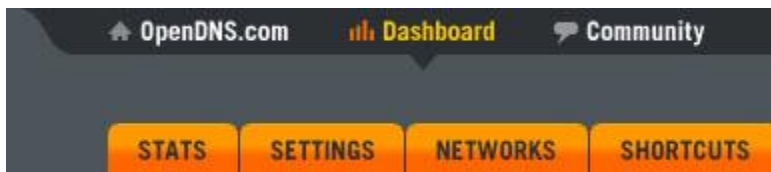
For those using Windows computers, there are some built-in parental controls. Windows Vista is much more extensive, allowing parents to limit Internet surfing by time of day, or by category and sub category, such as violent online games. A guide to turning on and using this feature is available at Microsoft's page, "Windows Vista Parental Controls help ensure family safety on the Internet."

A second approach is to use a service that controls where the user surfs without having to install any software on the computer. Such a service is available for free at www.opendns.com. I installed this on several computers without any negative side effects. All of these computers are on a home network and continue to work fine. The service blocks sites based on a list, which is continually updated with sites deemed unsafe.

How does this work? It starts with a DNS or a Domain Naming Server. A DNS is a computer server that translates easy-to-remember Web addresses into a number that other computer networks recognize. For example, if you type yahoo.com into your Internet browser, your Internet Service Provider takes the letters and translates it to 209.131.36.158. But who can remember that? Since your ISP doesn't filter any web sites and OpenDNS does, you will be protected from sites that OpenDNS considers unsafe.

To use OpenDNS, just go to their web site and click "Start using OpenDNS." You will have to create an account with an actual e-mail address so you can respond to it to complete the registration. The instructions are very straightforward, complete with images to guide you through the process.

If you have a router and select that option, it may not work if your ISP assigns dynamic IP addresses as Cox Cable does. In that case, just setup each computer on the network separately. Use the Settings link to select the level you want to use - the "Moderate" setting is the best compromise.

To make changes in the future, just go to the OpenDNS website, login, select the Dashboard link and make your changes with the Settings link.

If you subsequently want to block or allow a site that is not managed by OpenDNS, just go to the "Settings" page and use the "Manage Domains" feature. Be sure to use the drop-down box and select "Always block" or "Never block" as appropriate. If you change the settings from any computer on the network, they will all change accordingly. Also, if you use this feature on a PC with wireless, be sure to change the Internet connection properties for the wireless and wired connections. If you use your laptop at another location, OpenDNS will still protect you. If, however, you have multiple PC's on a home network, you have the choice to choose which ones use the OpenDNS servers, which gives you more freedom.

Manage individual domains

If there are domains you want to make sure are always blocked (or always allowed) regardless of the categories blocked above, you can add them below.

Always block ▼ [   ]

(ADD DOMAIN)

To see if it is working, you can go to www.binsearch.info which is a fairly benign site.. You must allow at least 3 minutes for any changes to take affect. *~Ed Schwartz, NOCCC member. View his blog at www.edwardns.com/blog*.