<u>Parenting -the Holidays and the Internet</u>

This holiday season, tens of millions of teens and young children in the United States will take a much needed—or at least strongly desired—break from school and enjoy a short vacation. It is supposed to be a time to relax, enjoy family time together, and reflect on the blessings you have. But the place where millions of those children will turn this season might have not-so-festive dangers lurking.

Unfettered by homework, bed-times, and other responsibilities, many young children and teenagers will spend countless hours this holiday season on the Internet and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. And, with the flexibility of their schedule, this could take place any time of day—late at night or during the day, while many parents are sleeping, socializing or away at work.

There are two primary dangers that your child can face on the internet—and they are not unlike the dangers you protect them from each day in your own neighborhood, at school, and with friends. First, your child's own behavior can place them in harm's way: making friends with the "wrong" people, Befriending without discretion, disclosing personal information, even engaging in what they believe to be good-natured fun can all land children in unsafe/dangerous situations. Second and more serious, your child may fall victim to the predatory behavior of others who seek out children and use deception to gain and then exploit their innocence and trust.

But what can you possibly do as a parent? It's nearly impossible these days to insulate a child from the Internet completely. So it's a real challenge! Most of us feel under-equipped to address this danger adequately; you certainly can't always be watching them and truth be told you aren't as skilled at the internet as they are. Don't get discouraged!

To help you get started, we have supplied some easy-to-implement suggestions following the acronym P.A.R.E.N.T. that can get you involved immediately in your child's life online:

1. **P**articipate. It may seem rudimentary, but my first piece of advice is to start participating. Start early. Start young. Start now. Ideally, your teenage child would never remember the day mom and dad made rules for the Internet. It is as natural and beneficial for your children to grow up with internet guidelines as it is to have a set bed time or curfew.
2. **A**ssess for yourself. You may think you're too old or simply uninterested in using the social networking websites that your children use. You miss the point. You weren't too old to play peek-a-boo with your toddler. Why disengage now? You don't need to be an expert you just need to know what's going on.
3. **R**eview. Where is the family PC located? Do your children have the ability or the privilege of using a laptop unsupervised in the secrecy of their bedroom? A publicly located family computer creates a precedent for the type of involvement that is not only your right as a parent, but also your duty.
4. **E**ducate. You may not be a computer-whiz, but you know what is appropriate and what is not. You should create guidelines for your children and clearly communicate what is expected. Teach your children about the dangers that exist so they can appreciate the protection you provide.
5. **N**egotiate. Work with your children to create rules designed for their safety and maximum enjoyment. As children, we were taught not to jump on the bed, not to talk to or go with a stranger in the street, not for restriction's sake, but to prevent painful experiences while we played. The same is true for your child's life online.
6. **T**rack. For some parents, this is the most difficult step. How can I know what my child does online? How can I see who their friends are, what they're talking about, and what content their viewing? You must talk with them...but more often than not they won't tell you. But there are monitoring tools available that allow parents to see what their children do online—not unlike how you would know what they do in your back yard or in the house—so that you can enforce the rules which you have set.

Parents interested in implementing these ideas may benefit from monitoring software. The software can help you maintain parental control and save you and your children endless anguish.

One such software is McGruff Safeguard. McGruff Safeguard offers parents the ability to filter Internet content to age-appropriate levels, access activity reports remotely, receive daily activity reports, and even receive instant text message alerts about dangerous activity. Best of all because of its national partnerships, McGruff SafeGuard is available FREE to all parents and caregivers at www.GoMcGruff.com

During this holiday season keep your children and the children in your community safe as they venture online. Forward this email off to friends and family to ensure that it is a safe holiday season for all.