

Dedication

To my family who is always so supportive and encouraging. With all my heart, thank you to my wife, Betty, and sons Giuseppe and Matteo, for being you.

Preface

I appreciate you reading this book for several reasons. For one, it is a testimony to your dedication of learning more about how to better safeguard your children in a high-tech world. I don't take this for granted. Adults are busy people and today's children require, in my opinion, more time and attention than ever before. I also believe that children today are developing at a faster rate and becoming more sophisticated in how they think and in what they can do. Effective parenting and educating is more challenging as a result. I hope that this book will be the beginning of a more long term plan for your own technological literacy.

The second reason I am glad you picked up *GuardingKids.com* is that you are important to the protection of other peoples' children, not just your own. You see, technology is ubiquitous – it's everywhere! Parents can do everything right and take all the reasonable precautions for guarding their children online and yet their child may still be vulnerable. That child need only to go visit a friend's house with an Internet connected computer, cell phone, game box, or other device and be completely susceptible to high-tech trouble if the parent(s) in *that* household do not take similar precautions. By actively learning more about Internet and technology safety, you are dedicating yourself to *not* being the weakest link in a highly connected planet.

This book endeavors to achieve two primary goals. First, to increase your awareness of the types of risks that families take when allowing their children to use high-tech tools in an unsupervised and uneducated manner. There is no way that I could cover all possible risks because there are too many of them so here I will help you focus on what I believe are the most pressing. I offer some practical solutions along the way although reserve the last two chapters of the book for a comprehensive overview of methods for reducing the risk that technology poses among children. The reason for this is simply organizational. As I was writing, I realized that one solution or method for reducing high-tech risks can apply to many different problems (e.g., incorporating blocking/filtering software on your home computer). When a unique solution to a problem arises, I describe it immediately after letting you know about the issue. Also, know that when it comes to reducing the risk of high-tech trouble among kids, one size does not fit all. There are many solutions that could work for you, your family, and/or your students given your situation. Use your own judgement for what will work best for you. More often than not, you will want to use a combination of interventions. Sometimes, you can start with human solutions and then use technological solutions as if they don't work. For example, you may set up a rule in your home, no Internet after 10pm. If the children follow the rule, great. If after a while they continue to break the rule, then you can use a program that automatically shuts off the Internet connection at that time (a program called CyberSitter does a nice job of scheduling Internet access if you need it to).

You may start to feel yourself getting upset or frustrated while reading along because you may discover that you have unwittingly allowed an unacceptable level of technological risk in your home or classroom because you were not aware. That is, with increased awareness comes potential anxiety. Quick story. When I was doing a workshop for a Parent Teacher Association one time about Technology Safety, a woman who was visibly upset stood up and began to confront me. She had given both of her children laptops without any protection such as blocking or filtering software and unlimited/unsupervised access to the Internet. She claimed that, "Kids will be kids and it's unrealistic to worry about any of this stuff!" She also said that, "If we interfere, the kids will just go underground and hide what they are doing from us." I understand that this Mom may have felt a bit uneasy knowing that she had allowed her children to be in risky situations, that is an unsettling idea. However, I told her that I disagreed with her "don't ask and don't tell" approach to kids and technology. Other people have reacted similarly and so now, at the beginning of a training, I always warn parents that they may come to realize that they made some mistakes about how they allow their children to use technology. I reassure them that we all do the best we can with what we know at any given time. And, I remind them that they are not alone – most people are not very aware of the potential risks of technology. Finally, I encourage them to embrace the idea that "It's never too late to change course." Although difficult, any decision you make with your children, with some finesse, can be changed given new information." They will not like it although remember you are not competing in a popularity contest. Indeed, they may take some actions "underground" and you cannot control that. Hopefully, however, you have developed a strong relationship which will discourage your children from doing this.

**It's never too late
to change course ...**



Solutions for reducing risk can typically be divided into two categories – human and technological. As you will see, I highly emphasize taking human precautions such as developing a trusting and open relationship with your child, sharing the online experience, and strategically placing your Internet connected computer in a viewable area (e.g., the living room). Technological solutions such as using filters, blockers, key loggers are secondary and meant only to be a "backup" in the certain case that human error occurs. A combination of these should prove effective. However, have you noticed that I have not used the word *prevention* when it comes to safeguarding our children. As parents, we need to face the fact that, given the rapid and relentless proliferation of technology, *completely* preventing our children from possible threats is impossible. You may put into place several different safety mechanisms and yet your child may someday still, intentionally or not, view a pornographic website or talk to strangers in a chat room. As parents, we simply cannot control everything that our children do or think. The best we can do is provide an environment that is supportive and structured while teaching them the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make responsible decisions for themselves – especially when no one else is watching. There is no such thing as a 100% guarantee.

As you read, try to keep a fair and balanced perspective. Technology, including the Internet, is not inherently good or evil. Albeit quite powerful, computers, cell phones, mp3 players, personal digital assistants, etc. are all tools. We judge these tools by the impact they have on us as individuals and as a society. That impact is directly related to how the person or user decides to use the tool. Every technology that I describe in these pages could easily be included in a book that showcases their usefulness and places them in a positive light. Many people will tell you that these very same technologies have made their lives easier, more interesting, and perhaps even more joyful. These technologies can bridge the distance between family members, help businesses keep a competitive edge, and automate the mundane parts of our lives so that we can focus on more meaningful activities. The Internet is not a fad but a network that will continue to become even more integrated throughout the fabric of our lives. The march of progress, for better or worse, continues unabated. How we entertain ourselves, communicate, be productive in our work – everything – will continue to change rapidly and without very good prediction.

Warning: Some things may be surprising!



There is lots of information here to digest and a great deal of it can be a bit of a surprise. After a while, you may feel like throwing your computer out the window or joining the Amish in the Pennsylvania Dutch Country. But remember, technology is not going away. We need to deal with this. We need to harness the power of technology to give our kids every advantage in competing in the global economy of the 21st century. Indeed, there are several pieces of good news. First, understanding technology and making better decisions as a result is not an event but a process. You don't have to "get it" all at once, only a little bit consistently over time. Consider technological literacy as professional development just like a lawyer who keeps up with the changing laws a little bit each week or month, you can do the same for your profession – including parenting. Second, there is a great deal of help around you. Later in the book I point out some of the many online tutorials, many of them free, to help you understand and practice. Also, you can take classes, webinars (seminars over the web), purchase videos, work with your local library, and more. I also encourage you to let your kids be the teachers and you be the student. It's a chance for them to show off their knowledge and for you both to have a shared experience.

Something else I want to point out is related to perspective. This book focuses on the potential for high-tech trouble among children and how parents, educators, and other care takers can help guard them. If you think about something half the time, you tend to believe that it happens half the time, maybe even to half the people. Realize that we are dealing with prevalent problems and issues posed by technology although the risks are certainly not pandemic. Of course, one victim of cyberbullying or sexual predation is one too many. But to believe that every child is at risk by simply logging on is not accurate. Most children use technology to interact with their real life friends and they have been smart to keep personal information private. They "get it." My recommendation is to keep your guards up and be on the defense although also put the risks into proper perspective. And, most important ... panicking, over-reacting, and being irrational won't solve any problems that may arise.



Growing and educating responsible children is an immense challenge over the long haul. So, I've also listed some valuable resources in the form of further readings, websites, and other resources throughout the book. In addition, I've developed a website that can serve you in this endeavor well after you read the book. The address is www.GuardingKids.com. At this website, please share with me and others about your experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, so that we may all learn from each other – so that as a community of care takers, we can best protect our most important natural resource – kids.

Evolution of GuardingKids.com

This book was a next step in a series of logical goals for me. My mission for the last two decades has been to help children and families succeed academically, personally, and in their careers. That is, I am interested in helping children to become responsible, productive, and likeable members of society. I've worked in the field of mental health and in schools as a school counselor. And for the last 13 years I've trained adults to become counselors in schools, the community, and in private practice as part of my duties as a university professor.

I've always been intrigued by gadgets and, at the same time, enjoyed coming up with creative solutions to every day problems. As technology rapidly evolved, I was especially captivated by its potential for helping people to achieve their goals in more effective, efficient, and enjoyable ways. The 1990's was a particularly exciting and energizing period. Technology, fueled by rapid advancements in microprocessor design as well as the development of the World Wide Web impacted every aspect of life in our country. Virtually no industry was left untouched, and no profession left unaltered by these changes. In the counseling field, practitioners explored new ways to meet and interact with clients. We saw changes in how we managed our offices and received training, consumed research, and prepared for the future. We developed new words and new concepts, and began to think about what we did in new ways because of these changes. Like most people, counselors are also awed by the ways that technology can assist us in achieving more than we could achieve without technology. We are surrounded by "smarter" machines from our automobiles that can anticipate and assist in preventing a crash to our kitchen toaster that "knows" when your pastry is hot enough. Equipment inside our homes including computers, television, stereo, and other appliances are increasingly being networked and can be operated onsite or remotely using the Internet or cellular phone. This decade witnessed the spawning of new technology related careers and made others extinct. Some of these new careers were not even envisioned 10 years ago by most Americans. ¹

As a counseling profession, we realized that learning about technology (i.e., technological literacy) was no longer just for fun, it became an issue of competency. At some point, counselors who decided to “opt out” of information technology such as the Internet found themselves to be working with students who perceived them to live in a world that no longer existed. This perception certainly does not contribute to a productive counseling relationship. Also, counselors who avoided emerging technology discovered that education, similar to business and industry, was rapidly changing and that high-tech tools were needed to keep up. Probably around the late 1990s, technological knowledge and skills became a critical component of the professional counselors’ expertise in order to maintain acceptable levels of competency.

As counselors were learning about how to better leverage technology in their work, we were also noticing the potential hazards, especially among children, who are rapidly integrating technology into their lives. It has become all too clear these days that helping kids learn how to be responsible users of technology is essential. Parents, counselors, and other educators are now working to make this a standard part of technological and media literacy.

I’ve realized a couple of other things along the way as well. First, the risks among adults and children alike – especially children – are increasing. From social networks such as MySpace.com to instant messaging, cell phones, text messaging, exposure to pornography, bullying, hate, and inappropriate content, the level and intensity of danger is on the rise. Second, it seems to me that children are more technologically literate than their parents or guardians. This makes sense. Children are growing up in this high-tech world. They have been immersed in rapid technological developments and have grown quite accustomed to change. In contrast, their parents and other care takers grew up in a different world and have been forced to adapt. For many adults, adapting to the amazing changes brought on by technology has come with fear, avoidance, and certainly stress. This has created an imbalance between kids who are “in the know” and their parents/care takers whom are “in the dark.” And because technological literacy in our current information age translates into power, kids are in some ways more powerful than their parents. This is not good. Parents are entrusted to provide appropriate structure, guidance, supervision, and much more in the course of caring for their children. Yet, a lack of understanding about technology has compromised their ability to do just that.

My attention now has turned from working with mostly professional school counselors to working more with all care takers – parents, teachers, counselors, grandparents, guardians, etc. – so that we may *all* more effectively monitor, supervise, and guard kids against high-tech trouble.

As both a professor and a parent, I thank you for learning more about this important issue. I also encourage you to share your own tips, tricks, and related recommendations with me by visiting www.GuardingKids.com.

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