✓ People you meet on the internet can be anybody from anywhere. It's very easy to pretend to be someone you are not when the other person cannot see your face or hear your voice. Remind your children whoever they are talking to could be lying.

✓ Remember the motto "If it's too good to be true, it probably is." Apply this idea to what people say, any offers they make, or things they try to sell you.

✓ Never allow your child to meet face-to-face with someone they meet online without your permission, knowledge, and attendance.

✓ Keep the computer in the family or living room so that the computer becomes a family activity. Since the computer is in a communal living space, children will feel less comfortable downloading or viewing inappropriate material.

✓ Teach your children to never enter information into a website unless they see the little lock symbol on the bottom right corner of their screen. That symbol means the transaction is encrypted, and can't be intercepted.

✓ If you do decide to enter information into a website, make sure you uncheck any options at the bottom asking to send you information from various vendors. This will reduce the number of sites that know your contact information.

✓ Websites that require email addresses or other personal information usually have a privacy policy. Always read the privacy policy. If there isn't one, don't submit the information.

✓ Meet your child's online friends and get to know them as well as you know their real friends.

✓ Ask your child to give you a tour of what sites they like to visit and how to use them. If the sites require a user name and password, learn them.

Most of these suggestions work well with video games and cell phones too. If your child's cell phone is part of your family plan, check to see if free text messaging is part of the package, or if your child's phone has web capabilities. All of these features usually require an extra charge so you can check on your bill to see if they are available or have been used.

Video games are rated now, just like movies. The ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) has a ratings system available right on the box so you can determine how mature the game is before you buy it.

If you suspect that your child may be experiencing some online trouble, here are a few suggestions on how to determine if there is a problem, and what to do if there is.

✓ Ask. Sometimes the direct approach works best, and your child may appreciate you being up front with them.

✓ Clock how often your child is spending time online. If they are spending a lot of time, especially late at night, it may be an indication that there is a problem.

✓ Every website that is visited is recorded in a history folder. Learn how to access the history folder and view which sites your child has recently visited. Set administrative controls to make it impossible for your child to empty the history folder before you can check it.

✓ Monitor your credit card bills for any unfamiliar charges. Many adult sites require credit card information as proof that the viewer is over 18.

✓ Learn about cookies. A cookie is a piece of text that a web server can store on a user's hard disk. Cookies allow a web site to store information on a user's machine and later retrieve it. This is another great way to check where your child has visited.

✓ Sporadically search your home computer for any pictures, sound files, or movies. This is easily done by searching for any file that ends in .mp3, .mpeg, .bmp, .wav, .mpeg, .gif, or .wma. To do this, simply type "*.mp3" in the search field to look for that type of file.

Above all, remember that no computer, video game console, or cell phone should be used as a babysitter. None of the above is good enough to replace parental supervision. For more information on computer and internet terms visit www.netlingo.com.