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Office of the
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ASSURING THE ETHICAL USAGE OF TECHNOLOGY: For Educators and Parents

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“Thus the Catholic school should be able to offer young people the means to acquire the knowledge they need in order to find a place in a society which is strongly characterized by technical and scientific skill. But at the same time, it should be able, above all, to impart a solid Christian formation.” (The Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, The Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997)

Every era of human history has presented technologies that simultaneously hold enormous potential and great risk for us. This is not new. A sharp stone could be used to compensate for the fact that we didn't have sharp teeth and claws, but it could also be turned against our neighbors. Somehow, this is all within God's plan for us, giving us the intelligence and creativity to invent technologies that enhance our existence, and the spiritual resources to choose how we use them.

Gutenberg's press made possible the first wide distribution of the gospel, yet, once words and ideas could be more quickly printed and distributed; it also facilitated the dissemination of hateful messages and concepts.

Our newest technologies are no exception, and in fact, their power and expansiveness underscore today, like no time ever in history, our need to understand both the ethical and the unethical sides of their use. As educators and parents we must take a proactive role in this regard because, now more than ever, our leaders have recognized the importance of our involvement and participation.

Although the Internet can be a tremendous resource for information, it can also be a dangerous place that puts young people at risk. You may have heard or read recent news and media features regarding the social networking website, *myspace.com*. These social websites pose a special challenge because they can have explicit pictures, profiles, chat rooms, and other information regarding children and youth.

“Chat rooms are probably the most dangerous area on the Internet. You don’t know who is there, so never say anything in a chatroom that you, wouldn’t say in public...”; and, *“...The most important thing to remember is that when you’re on line in any kind of public forum, you’re out in public and ANYONE can read what you post.”* (www.safeteens.com., The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children)

“The Internet has created both great benefits and some problems.....Because it poses serious dangers by giving easy access to pornographic and violent material, we support vigorous enforcement of existing obscenity and child pornography laws, as well as efforts by the industry to develop technology that assists parents, schools, and libraries in blocking out unwanted materials.” (*Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003)

So we have, in hand, the proverbial double-edged sword, sharper than any that have ever existed before. In our Catholic schools we address both sides of this blade, making the strongest efforts to teach and provide opportunities for the best use of available technology, while at the same time monitoring and teaching about what dangers exist and how we expect our students to conduct themselves in response to those “opportunities as well.” This is not easy on either end, because the opportunities mushroom faster than we can track them, and the dangers also multiply, faster than we can say, “instant messaging, blogging, or pod cast.”

Our responsibility in Catholic Education and in partnership with parents is to create an awareness of today’s technology and its ethical usage. Educators are expected to understand the religious, social, ethical, legal, and human issues surrounding the use of technology and apply that understanding in daily practice. Additionally, through the Archdiocesan Office of Catholic Schools, we stand as an “on demand” resource to our school communities in providing detailed, informational workshops on Internet Safety, or in answering questions relating to cyber bullying, spamming, or the problem *du jour*. More than anything we see the empowering possibilities of distance learning, streaming video, digital libraries, and literally having the world at our fingertips, and want to make this shine as a component of quality Catholic school education.

Our community reaches beyond the family, beyond the church, and beyond the school, into cyberspace. We can form connections with one another that are broader, deeper, wider, and even superficial, if we wish, than ever before. With this freedom comes awesome responsibility. We cannot guess what comes tomorrow, nor account for every possibility or problem that social websites will pose. What we can do is stay aware and alert, providing guidance and formation to our children and youth.

General information and guidance about children's online use, is available at the Federal Trade Commission's "Kidz Privacy" website:

www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/edcams/kidzprivacy/index.htm. You can keep children and youth safe by:

1. Educating yourself in detail about the ways that technology can lead to trouble and unethical usage. Then, make sure children and youth are educated in the same dangers. Get specific - understanding the subtle ways in which technology can be used in errant ways.
2. Monitor email accounts for elementary and middle school children. Limiting personal email accounts to high school or later. Letting younger students use your family email address to talk with relatives and approved friends.
3. Putting passwords on all home computers and changing the password frequently.
4. Making sure you have firewalls and software loaded to restrict the sites your children can visit on the computer. Information about internet filtering and monitoring software is available at *Software4parents.com*.
5. Putting the computer in a room where it is in plain sight of all adults.
6. Teaching your children how to report and deal with intrusive emails and telephone calls.
7. Talk often to children and youth about the ethical usage of technology. Watch for the latest "trends" and establish a trusting, yet guided, relationship.

Resource

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