

Cyber Ethics

Is there a difference between ethics in the real world and ethics online? While the answer to this question might seem obvious to parents, for many children, there is a very real—and potentially dangerous—disconnect between ethics in the real world and cyberspace. A recent poll found that nearly half of the elementary and middle school students who responded said they don't believe hacking is a crime. Why is there this divide between real-world and cyber ethics, and what can parents do to make sure that their children practice ethical behavior when online?

The Ethical Divide

Is the Internet that much different than the real world? After all, a crime *is* a crime. There are two characteristics of the Internet that make it difficult for children to transfer ethical behavior to the online environment:

The first characteristic is the feeling of anonymity. The *New Yorker* once published a cartoon with the punch line, “On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog”; the cartoon was making the point that it is easy to feel invisible on the Internet. Children often believe that they are “invisible” online because they cannot be identified and can get away with more (this actually isn't true—modern computer forensics makes it very easy to track a user online). Many young children also feel that regular rules don't apply to the Internet.

The second characteristic is distance. On the Internet, many people do and say things to others that they would never consider doing to someone face-to-face. Because children cannot see the direct consequences of their actions, they often think that what they are doing won't harm anyone else. Of course, parents know that this is not true. Actions on the Internet still have the same repercussions as actions in the real world.

Promoting Ethical Behavior Online

Now that we know a little bit about why children don't transfer ethical behavior to the online environment, we can examine a few strategies for promoting ethical behavior:

- **Communication:** The most obvious strategy involves taking the time to talk with our children about acceptable and unacceptable online behavior. Children need to understand that their actions can impact others, and that they should practice the same etiquette online as they would in the real world. Make comparisons between online and real-world ethics and point out that they are, in reality, the same.
- **Modeling:** When online, model ethical behavior and point out areas where ethical behavior makes a difference.
- **Contracts:** Sign a “contract” with your children that outlines the type of behavior you expect, as well as the consequences for breaching the contract. What should be in this contract? A good source of information to draw from is the Computer Ethics Institute's “10 Commandments of Computer Ethics,” which you can find online at www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/its/cei/default.htm.

Summary

Children need to know that using the Internet is a privilege, not a right, and that improper use has consequences. Sitting down with your child and discussing these issues is the best way to make sure he does not use the Internet in a harmful or malicious way.