Keeping Kids Safe Online
By Mike Journee
Boise State University Communications and Marketing

Keeping your children safe and secure while on the Internet seems like anything but a “virtual” concern these days. And when school assignments require time online, it’s often hard for parents to keep tabs on everything their children are exposed to.

Robert Minch, an Internet security expert and information technology professor at Boise State, said a little extra vigilance by parents can help keep children safe as their online time ramps up during the school year. These three things are a start:

• Educate your child about appropriate online behavior, especially the dangers of giving out personal information.
• Warn them that they might run across inappropriate things online and tell them what to do when that happens.
• Set up the computer with the right software and settings beforehand to ensure you keep them as safe as possible.

“It’s really about common sense,” Minch said. “Something as simple as keeping the computer that they use in the living room or kitchen or someplace you can watch them while they work is a very effective way of keeping an eye out for trouble.”

But Minch was careful about endorsing measures so stringent that the positive benefits of having the World Wide Web at your fingertips are counteracted.

Instead, Minch recommended parents regularly check the logs of recent websites viewed (available on most Internet browsing software), ensure that anti-spyware and anti-virus software is kept up to date, and check to see that search engine filters, like the “Safe Search” mechanism on Google, are enacted.

He also recommended that children have their own computer, or at the very least their own account on a computer used by multiple family members, in order to keep important family records – such as financial records or a parent’s work files – safe from accidental dissemination or deletion.

For parents with younger children and kids who want to use the Internet and family computer appropriately, these measures are often enough to keep unsuspecting children safe from prying eyes or worse, Minch said. But for tech-savvy children or older kids who are intentionally misusing a computer, perhaps even working to conceal their online activity from parents, it may take an expert to foil their escapades.

“I don’t think the average parent could deal with a situation like that themselves,” Minch said. “They need an expert who knows more about the computer than their children do.”