

Common Sense on Smart Searching Online

Help your child search the Web like a pro

“Let’s google dinosaurs.” Sound familiar? Searching the Web is so commonplace that even young children know what it means to “google.” But when your children really need to do research for a report — or dive deeper into a subject they’re interested in — it helps to know some strategies for improving their results.

Some facts

49 percent of Internet users conduct a search on any given day (*Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008*)

Google is the most popular search engine in the world (*comScore, 2009*)

81 percent of parents think the Internet has helped their child learn skills and information needed to succeed in school (*Cable in the Classroom/ Common Sense Media poll by Harris Interactive, 2007*)

What’s the issue?

Effective online searching can make a huge difference in the quality and relevance of the content your children find on the Internet. But it takes a bit of know-how to improve the chances of getting back the information they’re looking for. You can help your child search smarter — and waste less time — by explaining how to search like a pro.

Why it matters

Everyone knows there’s a huge amount of data on the Internet. But only a tiny fraction of this information will apply to your child’s needs. While most children know how to type a keyword into Google or Internet Explorer, they may not understand that there are lots of different ways to search for the same information.

Different search engines work differently. So if your family typically uses Google, you’ll get a whole host of additional information by using search engines such as Bing, Ask, and Yahoo. Another kind of search engine is called a “meta-search engine,” which sends keywords to several different search engines at once. And search sites called directories work by having people select relevant data to match your search terms. By using a directory, you may not get as many search results, but the search results you do get are likely to be closer to what you’re looking for.

Finally, the links that come up in searches may have some strings attached — not to the research topic, but to advertisers. Regular keyword searches might yield anything from an advertisement, a sponsored link (basically a different kind of ad), or just a popular website that contains lots of advertising. Children can spend a lot of time chasing irrelevant, incorrect, or not-quite-right links from these types of search results.

Smart searching will help avoid a lot of wasted time. Teaching children to think critically about search results will definitely help them find better information for schoolwork. But smart searching will also allow your children to think more critically about any information they find on the Internet.

Parent tips for all kids

- » **Choose your search terms carefully.** The most precise words will yield the best results.
- » **Adding more words can narrow a search.** As you get farther into your research, you may want to narrow your results. There's a big difference between "Apple" and "Red Delicious Apples History United States."
- » **Use synonyms!** If kids can't find what they're looking for, have them try keywords that mean the same thing or are related.
- » **Point out sponsored links.** They often appear at the top of a search result list to encourage users to click on them first, and they're usually labeled as sponsored. Remember that sponsored equals advertising.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **Be aware of your browser's safe search settings.** Typing even innocent keywords into a search engine may yield search results you don't want your children to see. If you decide to turn off your safe search settings in order to give your child more searching flexibility, you may want to keep an eye on them during their research process.

Try these Google searching shortcuts

- » **Use quotation marks.** Using quotes around a set of words will direct Google to search for those exact words, in that exact order. Great for searching song lyrics!
- » **Write "site."** Typing site: (with the colon) after your keyword and before a URL will tell Google to search within a specific website. For example, movie reviews site:commonsense.org will give you search results only within Common Sense Media's website.
- » **Add a minus sign.** Adding a minus sign immediately before any word (no space in between!) indicates that you don't want those words to appear in your search results. For example, Saturn -cars will give you information about the planet and not the automobile.