

## Protecting God's Children for Adults



### Keeping Kids Safe Online by Teaching Them to Evaluate Sources

By [THE AGOS GROUP, LLC](#)

Last Tuesday at my dermatologist's office, I was diagnosed with a basal melanoma. The freckle that the doctor had cut off the week before had, upon further inspection by the lab, been found to be problematic. Luckily, the doctor explained, the spot was fairly new and isolated. Removing a little extra skin around the edges would all but entirely remove the risk of cancer spread. "I can send you to an oncologist if you want some more reassurance on this point," he said. "But, by all means, do not go on the Internet! You'll be scared stiff with all kinds of alarmist and incorrect information."

Isn't that an interesting admonition? "Don't go on the Internet." Surely I could find on the web a ton of information about melanoma. My doctor worried, however, that I wouldn't take the time or have the ability to assess the sources and figure out what information to trust, to apply to my own situation. That's a reasonable concern, actually—especially when it comes to kids.

Nowadays, even young children find all manner of information online. The challenge is no longer locating answers, but measuring the quality of them. This sort of higher-level critical thinking—the evaluation of sources—used to be the province of older kids: younger students consulted the class textbook or perhaps the home encyclopedia. Only at adolescence or so did a child learn to use the whole library for research. And, even there, his or her potential sources were at least vetted by book or periodical editors.

The web has intensified all of this. In so many cases, there is no editor assuring even the semblance of credibility—blog and video posting sites make it unbelievably easy for any private citizen to broadcast just about anything. Easy graphics and layout make even what amounts to the annual family Christmas letter look like a treatise. It is tempting for children to point to what they found on line and say, "I know this is fact because I read it here."

Of course, all sources are not created equal. Children using the Internet at any age need to think about what makes information more likely reliable and relevant. Consider the following three criteria, as well as some ideas on how to introduce "source checking" to youngsters.

**Expertise.** First and foremost, who is likely to have the most reliable information? Is it the person or group with the best academic credentials, the lengthiest industry practice, or the most defining personal experience? Not only do kids need to know what the standard for expertise should be, but they also need to have the tools

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#### THE AGOS GROUP, LLC

The AGOS mission is to help prevent workplace loss and litigation. The key word in our mission statement is prevent. Prevention always has been and always will be the cornerstone for everything we do at AGOS. AGOS is committed to providing employers with the most proactive and responsive risk management tools available. Our products and services include claims and incident prevention, claims and incident management, hiring practices, workplace policies and procedures, reporting mechanisms, and training. AGOS was founded in 1993, providing employers with risk management consultation. AGOS conducted extensive research into the causes and effects of the increase in workplace loss and litigation. This research led to the development of the WATCH—the comprehensive AGOS risk management system. We began offering elements of the WATCH in 1994, and currently have clients across North America. Since 1997, AGOS has significantly expanded on the

to assess authors on such grounds as: What is a “PhD”? What is the “Mayo Clinic”?

original WATCH program and evolved all of our products and services onto the Internet. Our AGOSNET web platform is the new generation of risk management.

**Motive.** Rarely is evaluating information solely a matter of evaluating expertise. Almost always, the perspective of the author plays an important role in what information to trust or not trust. The easiest example is advertising or marketing; children need to be taught explicitly to take with a grain of salt information provided for commercial ends. Similarly, children need to understand that information is often political, that people coming from different philosophical places may see different things as “true.” Commercial gain, political sway, and other questionable ends—especially abuse—prompt authors to exaggerate and sometimes even go so far as to be dishonest.

**Relevance.** The evaluation doesn’t end there, however. Kids must begin to learn what constitutes relevant information. This isn’t just a matter of making sure the information is applicable. The target audience for the information one finds online is really important here. Consider a quick example... .

My 11 year old is a new skateboarder. A few days ago, he found an Internet clip of a champion skateboarder talking about the value of custom-made skateboards. You can guess what came next: “Mommy, can I have a custom skateboard? This champion on the net says it is really important...”

This information doesn’t fail on the basis of expertise—the spokesperson is a true expert. Nor does it fail on motive—the spokesperson is speaking earnestly about what has improved his own skateboarding. Rather, my son hasn’t mastered a solid notion of audience, so he doesn’t realize that the spokesman is talking to other serious boarders. Almost everyone would agree that a custom skateboard would be wasted on a newbie 11 year-old.

It should not go unnoticed that these same sourcing skills are vital to children’s online safety. The framework for assessing “whom you trust” for a school paper lays a strategic predicate for whom you trust for online relationships. Moreover, caring adults can likely introduce concepts of expertise, motive, and relevance in regards to information when children are younger. Having this context will only make kids savvier when the stakes get higher.

Being smart—and safe—these days isn’t just “knowing stuff.” Rather, a safe and successful online life requires the ability to evaluate sources on the basis of expertise, motive, and relevance. Kids have to wrestle with this much younger now that the web has changed the game. Responsible adults can help.

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**1) The perspective and intent of an author of information found on the Internet—which plays an important role in what information to trust or not trust—is an aspect of what consideration?**

- A)  Relevance
- B)  Motive
- C)  Expertise
- D)  None of the above

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