

INSTANT MESSAGING (IM)



Instant messaging is real-time communication. It is a blend of e-mail and chat (since you send one to someone and get real-time communication). It is also fast eclipsing e-mail as the most popular Internet communication tool.

What is a Buddy List?

Buddy lists are a great way to keep track of *friends* online. Buddy List started on AOL to allow users to track other members and know when they were online so the user could contact them. Most services that provide Instant Messaging also provide the Buddy list feature. It is important that you know how many *friends* your child has on their buddy list. The only people who should be included are those individuals whom you (or your child) know well enough to call on the phone.

Hazards:

1. When IM accounts are created, the user is asked to complete a profile. While only a name and E-mail address are generally required to set up the account, the user may provide much more personal information. These profiles are searchable, and anyone who uses the service has access to the personal information provided within the profile.
2. Nicknames used for IMing may reveal personal information.
3. The grooming process frequently used by predators begins in a chat room. After meeting a potential target, the predator will move conversations to IM, where there's more privacy. If your child has *friends* on their buddy list that you don't know, they should NOT be talking with them.
4. IM is more private than chat. While more than 2 individuals may IM, typically that is not the case. As a result, your child may feel safer in an IM conversation and may be more relaxed in sharing personal information.
5. Since files can be attached to IM messages your child may be exposed to inappropriate materials or viruses sent through IM conversations.

What you should do:

Here are some suggestions if your child uses IM:

1. Talk to you child about their IM conversations. Show that you are interested in their conversations. If possible, have your child show you how to do it and engage in an IM conversation together. Learning how to use the technology with your child not only shows him/her you are interested, it also helps you learn more about what they are doing.
2. Establish rules for your child's IM use – i.e. the time of day an amount of time they are allowed to spend IMing, never to share personal information, what to do if he/she receives something that is inappropriate or makes them feel uncomfortable.
3. Check your child's profile and make sure only the required information has been provided.
4. Check your child's buddy list. If there are more than 5 or 8 buddies on the list, or if there are names that you don't recognize, ask your child about them. Strangers should be removed and/or blocked.
5. Discuss your child's IM nickname. Be sure that it doesn't share any personal information.

T.E.S.T.