By Sharon Miller Cindrich

Q: I'd like to monitor my child's activity online with some kind of parental controlsoftwar e, but there are so many products on the market– how do I know which is best?

When parents think about security, they think about keeping their computer safe, their personal information safe and, most importantly, their kids safe. Parent control software can keep kids from accessing inappropriate content online; it can keep logs of computer activity; it can block or limit chat conversations; it can even allow parents to see what their child is doing from a remote location.

HOW TO PICK A PROGRAM THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU

Choosing a parental control software product is a lot like choosing a car. You'll need to do a bit of research, and you'll want to consider your family's needs (your kids' ages, the programs and hardware you use, your online activities, etc.) in selecting which features you'll want in your software. Once you know your online safety goals and are familiar with the features available, it will just be a matter of narrowing down your options.

Check out this list of features as you begin thinking about what you want your parental control software to do, then look for these tools when comparing products:

- **Filter out graphic descriptions or images.** No filter is perfect, but many are able to block your family from visiting Web sites or viewing images of sexually graphic content. Most parental control programs, as well as many computer browsers, offer filter features.

- **Monitor your child's activity online.** Monitoring tools can alert parents when kids have visited a Web site without always limiting access, or make a record of Internet activity for parents to review. Some program even allow monitoring from a remote location.

- **Limit your child's time online.** Programs with this feature allow parents to set time limits for kids who like to use the computer or surf the Net. Some programs may also allow parents to determine the time of day a child is allowed to have computer access.

- **Restrict private information.** If you're concerned about your child giving out an address or phone number when they are online, this tool can help prevent a breech of privacy.

If you're still struggling, check out the **GetNetWise Tools** at www.getnetwise.org , which allow you to search a database by features to find a program tailored to your family's specific needs.

Remember, even the best parental control software can't do it all. Setting boundaries, supervising use, and regularly checking your computer's history (press "Ctrl" and "H" on a PC) will help you stay plugged in to what your child is doing online. Also make sure kids understand what is being blocked and why their activity is being monitored, so that you can lay a foundation for healthy conversations and an ongoing dialogue about computer safety.

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