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Protecting Kids in a Digital World

During summer break, families adjust to new routines as kids have more free time. With flexible schedules, children might spend more time online chatting with friends, playing games, or exploring hobbies. This is a good time for families to talk about safe and responsible internet use.

The internet is a big part of how children learn, have fun, and stay in touch with others. While technology has many benefits, it also brings risks that families need to know about. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Cyber Tip Line received **20.5** million reports of suspected online child exploitation last year. Reports involving generative artificial intelligence rose sharply, highlighting how quickly online risks are evolving.

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to stay involved in their children's digital lives by knowing which websites, apps, and games they use. Open conversations about privacy, online behavior, and what to do if something feels uncomfortable online can help children develop safe habits.

Educational resources such as NetSmartz and the *Into the Cloud* online safety videos available from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at missingkids.org/netsmartz offer age-appropriate, engaging ways for children to learn how to stay safe online. By learning about internet safety together, families can help create safer online environments for children throughout the summer and beyond.

For more information, visit healthychildren.org or contact Michelle Broxterman, Family and Child Development Extension Agent, at mbroxterman@ksu.edu or (620)724-8233.

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