Common Sense on Wikipedia

What's the Issue?

Wikipedia.org is where millions of people stop first for information. It's an ever-growing online encyclopedia, amazing in its depth and reach. Tools like Wikipedia are what make the internet so valuable. They also teach an important lesson, one you can start teaching your kids now: don't believe everything you read. Learning how to tell true information from false is the key to developing healthy critical thinking.

Wikipedia.org is an evolving collaborative online encyclopedia. A "wiki" is any site on the internet where users come together to create the content for a web page. There are no staff experts at Wikipedia. Instead, anyone can create or edit an article. Kids go to Wikipedia first when they have to do a research project since it's one-stop shopping and full of links to related articles. There are millions of entries on just about every topic or person imaginable.

While the site does have rigorous guidelines and a system to catch and eliminate false or irresponsible content, editors just can't keep up with the millions of constantly changing entries. Malicious articles are removed as quickly as possible. Carefully researched, comprehensive entries do exist, but a disclaimer states that information may be wrong, and that people should use the site as just one of many reference tools.

Why Does It Matter?

Because the community creates Wikipedia content, your kids can be caught unprepared with incorrect or biased information if they don't double-check their research. Young kids especially tend to believe what they read if a site looks authoritative, and Wikipedia sure does. Also, there are no filters on Wikipedia, so a kid can input just about anything and get just about anything back. On the positive side, wikis are a great way for kids to contribute and collaborate. They can share their knowledge and participate in "crowd-sourcing," which is just a fancy term for collective wisdom. Using Wikipedia can help your kids learn how to tell trustworthy entries from irresponsible or inaccurate ones.

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Parent tips for younger kids

Don't let them search alone. A site without filters means lots of inappropriate content. Remember, the site is not designed for kids. Although there are plenty of kid-friendly entries, a lot of mature content and images exist.

Parent tips for middle and high school kids

Help kids view content critically. Ask your kids how they know if something is true or not. Make sure they use other sources to verify information. Wikipedia articles usually have citations and links to sites where your kids can learn more about the article they're reading.

Know the rules. Ask your children or their teachers about school policies on using the site for reports.

Teach kids how to flag inappropriate content. Teach your kids that it's cool to write to Wikipedia and report something irresponsible. It keeps the community safe and reliable.

Find other resources. Some online reference sites don't require as much adult supervision. Introduce your kids to Social Studies for Kids, Homework Spot, and Britannica.

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Common Sense on Research and Evaluation

What's the Issue?

It starts in about fourth grade. Your child comes home from school with a report to write. Off to the internet they go. But as you probably know, not everything they find on the web can be trusted. These tips will help you look beyond a site's slick appearance to determine whether it's offering high-quality, trustworthy content.

The internet is bursting with information. Some of it's correct, some of it's questionable, and some of it is just plain wrong. But the internet is typically the first place young people look when they begin researching a report or are just trolling for information on their favorite topic. Though it may start in elementary school, they'll continue using the web right through college and beyond.

Why Does It Matter?

Anyone can publish on the internet, so not all sites are equally trustworthy. Teens have the ability to be more skeptical, but younger children tend to believe what they read and accept it as the truth.

When children use sources they find online that aren't of high quality, they risk using incorrect information, getting only part of the story, and worst of all, denying themselves the opportunity to truly learn as much as possible about their topics of interest.

When children use a website for their research, they should make sure it's worthy of their trust. Fortunately, there are ways to evaluate the trustworthiness of a site. It takes looking beyond a website's inviting design to the substance and content of the material.

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Parent tips for all kids

Evaluate a website's credibility. You can help your child dissect a website for clues to its accuracy with a little spy work. Here are some questions to ask that help determine the quality of a site.

- *Who wrote this?* Check to make sure the author or organization is credible by looking at their title, expertise, and background.

- *Dot what?* If the web address ends in .edu, then the material is from an academic institution; if it ends in .gov, it's from Good Ol' Uncle Sam – and both of them are good signs!

- *What is the source of information?* Does the site come from a well-known newspaper or organization?

- *When was this updated?* Has the site been updated recently? If not, move on.

- *What is this linked to?* Was the site linked from another webpage that you trust? That's not always a slam dunk in the credibility department, but it's probably a good sign.

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Compare multiple sources. Kids and teens should draw on several sites, for better accuracy. This will help them determine whether a piece of information is fact or fiction.

Watch out for ads. Help your kids notice when advertisers are trying to target them, and teach your kids to question what the ads are saying.

Parent tips for preteens and teens

Follow school assignment guidelines. Teachers often explicitly state their preferences for where students should search, how many sources they should gather, and in what format citations should be written.

Use Wikipedia as a springboard for searching. If kids need a jump-start on finding information about a topic, Wikipedia is easily accessible. Remind them that they shouldn't use it as a sole resource, only a launching point.

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Common Sense on Respecting Creative Work

What's the Issue?

It's Not a Free-For-All

Our kids are used to having all types of creative work available at their fingertips. People's writing, artwork, videos, and images can be inspiring, but they are also easy to take without thinking twice. We often forget about copyright law, which protects people's creative work. Even though kids may feel they have the right to take and use anything they find online, the internet is not a free-for-all. Kids have responsibilities for following copyright law and respecting creative work online. There are exceptions such as fair use, which allows kids to use a small amount of copyrighted material without permission in certain situations, such as for schoolwork, criticizing or commenting on something, and parody. There is also material in the public domain, which includes work that is no longer copyrighted that kids can use however they want.

Some kids may not think about the hard work that goes into creating something like a movie, song, novel, video game, or website. They may not realize that copying and pasting material they find online and into schoolwork is plagiarism. They may not understand that illegal downloading and sharing of music and movies is piracy, which is stealing. Kids need to be educated about using copyrighted work online, make sure they get permission before using copyrighted work, and properly cite the work they use. They should also think about how they would want to protect their own creative work.

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Help your kid make a habit of using the following process to be a responsible and respectful user and creator.

1. ASK. How does the author say I can use the work? Do I have to get the creator's permission first?
2. ACKNOWLEDGE. Did I give credit to the work I used?
3. ADD VALUE. Did I rework the material to make new meaning and add something original?

Tips for Families with Middle School Kids

We all know what pirates do. Remind your kids that illegal downloading of things such as movies, music, and software is piracy, and piracy is stealing. It also shows disrespect for the creators who made these works.

Emphasize the importance of originality. At this age, kids appreciate giving credit where credit is due. Encourage them to come up with their own ideas. In writing for their schoolwork, posting to a blog, or making a remix, are they saying things in their own words? Or are they relying too heavily on the work and ideas of others?

Encourage constructive commenting. At this age, kids may start to say mean things to each other – especially online – about people's creative works. Encourage your kids to be thoughtful and polite when commenting on the work of others, both online and offline.

Tips for Families with High School Kids

Encourage legal downloading and sharing. Discourage teens from using peer-to-peer (PTP) sharing sites. Illegal downloading and PTP sharing sites not only pose legal risks, they also show a lack of respect to the creators of the content they pirate. Encourage teens to use legitimate online retailers, for their music and movie downloads.

Challenge teens to take ownership of their work. Teens can get involved with copyright firsthand by licensing their work. Have they thought about how they'd like others online to be able to use their photos, writing, or videos? Encourage them to use licensing systems such as Creative Commons.

Is it fair use? Your teen might be making video remixes, mash-ups, fanfiction, blogs, or artwork. Fair use allows creators to use a small amount of copyrighted material without permission, but only in specific situations. See if your teen can defend whether or not their reworked creations fall under fair use.

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