

## Virtual worlds fraught with dangers for all ages

**Mark Pavilons**

The Internet today is a weird and wonderful place.  
It's also a virtu



al world filled with almost everything imaginable ? and unfortunately, many things unimaginable.

While the unrestricted electronic airwaves provide for instant communication, for parents of teens, and pre-teens, it's a very dangerous place.

It's all been fun and games, shopping, music and chatting until recent years. With the popularity of social networking sites, privacy has been an issue. Our personal details are now spread across the universe.

None of us were prepared for it, really.

And like Pandora's Box from fables, we've let the monster out and it's impossible to call him back again

Now, adults and teens have been dishing out explicit, degrading, inappropriate, crude and physically harmful crap for decades. Try as we may to foster a sense of social responsibility in our young, they will sometimes do stupid things. Their adult role models are also not beyond reproach.

Part of it is growing up and maturing. Part of it is learning social wrongs and rights. Part of it is pushing boundaries, experimenting and throwing caution to the wind.

The only difference today is the widespread access to such material, thanks to the Internet, smart phones, social media sites, etc. Almost every teen owns their own phone and many have smart phones, tablets and apps to access anything and everything. They are constantly on social media, talking to their facebook, twitter and [instagram followers](#), most of whom are strangers.

Soon, Internet access will be standard features in automobiles. Smart boards already exist in many classrooms and most schools have wi-fi services.

You can run, but you can't hide from this high-tech dream world.

There are things like parental controls, if we actually take the time to see and understand what our youngsters are doing on their devices.

It's so easy for children to access harmful images on the Internet, that we parents have to be vigilant, on guard and even pro-active. We have had occasions in our household where a multitude of inappropriate images appeared during otherwise ?normal??Internet searches for information. Whether by accident or by intention, once a youngster comes across such material, it's almost like the proverbial apple in the Garden of Eden ? so awfully tempting.

Let's face it. ?Teens have been experimenting with drugs, alcohol and relationships for hundreds of years. It's nothing new or unusual. It's been ignored or blocked by parents for just as long.

Today, however, posting such stuff can come back to haunt you. Some things remain floating around cyberspace forever, and again, that's something none of us anticipated.

It's not just the Internet ? questionable content seems to be permeating society.

Video games, once considered harmless fun, are now filled with violence, bad behaviour and sexual content. The games come with recommended ages, but again, this isn't really enforced and the onus is on parents to really investigate the content of these games. My wife is a video game morality officer. She Googles and then calls the retail stores to talk to people who've played the games. She questions them thoroughly until she's satisfied.

Movie ratings today are another matter. PG13 isn't always geared for pre-teens and one has to investigate the questionable aspects. Is it language, violence or suggestive content? My wife consults a movie rating app for parents, which counts the number of swear words, discusses content and even notes product placement!

But again, we are the guardians for morality and good taste ? if we have the time.

We can't let our guard down. While we can enforce limits, restrictions and safeguards, we can't always protect our young from the harsh world outside our front doors.

At least knowing about the dangers makes us better prepared to deal with them. Here's a thought. How about talking to our kids every night at the dinner table, and answering their questions about life?

Just a thought.