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. But 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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