

## **A Parent's Guide to Safe, Simple Kid-Friendly E-Mail**

**The Internet can be a dangerous place for children, but it's an increasingly necessary evil. Here's how to set up e-mail for your young'uns while maintaining parental control.**

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When it comes to children and the Internet, most parents focus on [safe Web browsing](#). That's understandable, given that the Web can sometimes seem like [one big Red Light District](#). But the Web isn't the only source of objectionable material online. [E-mail can be just as bad](#).

Surely, you say, there must be a simple way to let kids exchange messages with family members and friends while protecting them from online predators, crude spam, phishing messages, and the like. In other words, if there's a NetNanny, there must be a "MailNanny" too, right? Well, not really. But this quick guide will help you pick the most age-appropriate e-mail setup and give you tips to keep the deluge of online indecency from reaching your little ones.

Anybody familiar with Gmail knows that it does a pretty good job of blocking spam and viruses, so why not just create a new account for your teen or tween? You could, but Gmail's browser-based interface isn't exactly kid-friendly. Plus, it offers no parental controls, such as the highly desirable option of creating an approved-senders list (grandma, yes; chunkylover53@aol.com, no). Some creative [Boolean filtering](#) might do the trick, but who has the time (or degree in computer science) for all that?

As a busy parent, I certainly don't have that kind of time, which is why I'm test-driving three other options: AOL, Windows Live Mail, and a service called ZooBuh. Each lets you set up individual accounts for your kids and helps enforce various usage restrictions, such as who they can e-mail and who can e-mail them. Here's what you need to know about all three.

### **Kids + AOL = KOL**

Cross AOL's longstanding free e-mail service with a child-oriented Web portal, and what do you get? [KOL](#), which offers not only games, music, movies, and other stuff aimed at teens and tweens, but also free e-mail accounts with robust parental controls.

## Set Up a New AOL Screen Name for My Child

Create a Parent Account > **Create a Child Account** > Download and Install

\*Child's First Name:

\*Child's Last Name:

\*Child's Screen Name:  @aol.com  
3-16 letters or numbers. It must start with a letter.

\*Password:   
6-16 letters or numbers.  
 Help for creating a secure password.

\*Re-Type Password:

\*Indicates a required field

Select a Protection Level

<input checked="" type="radio"/> Kids 12 & Under	<b>Parental Controls provides the following protections:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to child-friendly web sites only</li> <li>• AOL Search, filtered for kids</li> <li>• Limited AOL Mail and AIM</li> <li>• Online Time Limits</li> <li>• Activity Reports</li> </ul>
<input type="radio"/> Young Teen 13-15	
<input type="radio"/> Mature Teen 16-17	
<input type="radio"/> General	

Because AOL has been around for so long and has so many users, finding an available screen name for your child can pose a challenge.

To take advantage of them, you'll first need an AOL account of your own. If you don't already have one, head to [AOL.com](http://AOL.com), click *Free Mail*, and follow the instructions. From there, visit [AOL Parental Controls](#) and click the appropriate age group--Kid, Teen, or Mature Teen--for your child. Next, click *Create Account*, and then fill out the form requesting your child's name, desired screen name, and password.

AOL has several bazillion screen names already in use, so you'll have to choose something unusual or nonsensical--always a good idea anyway, as a child's screen name shouldn't contain any personal information. As for the password, make it something easy for your child to remember, but still robust enough to thwart hackers. For example, insert numbers between the letters of your child's name, as in "s1a2r3a4h5".

Once you've completed the sign-up process, you'll have to download and install AOL's Windows-only Parental Controls software. With that step done, return to the Parental Controls Web site, where you'll see a green Settings area for your accounts. Click the *Edit* button next to your child's account, and then scroll down to the E-mail Controls box and click *Edit E-mail Settings*.

**AOL mail**

Mail Controls for: sarahsoccerstar8  
 Allow this Screen Name to view their Spam Folder

**AOL's Advanced Spam Filter:**  
 Off Low **Medium** High

Almost all Spam will be identified and delivered to your Spam Folder. Check your Spam Folder every few days to make sure wanted mail was not accidentally delivered there. This is the default recommended setting.

**Spam Filters by Address:**  
 Allow mail only from addresses I specify

**Allow Mail From**  
 Add  
 Remove  
 dad@parent.com  
 mom@parent.com  
 grandma@florida.com  
 schoolfriend@school.com

**What to do with blocked mail:**  
 Permanently delete

**Spam Filters by Content:**  
 Block messages containing pictures or files  
 Send messages containing specific words and phrases to my spam folder

Save

AOL offers custom spam filters that can block e-mail from all addresses except those you approve.

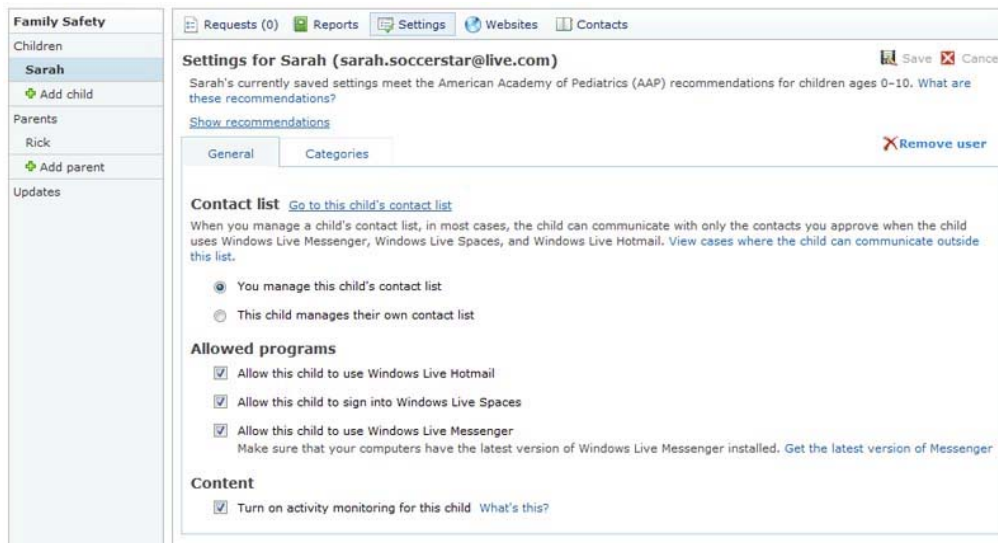
By default AOL allows mail from all senders to come through to your child's account, but you can set up a filter to allow only known senders--arguably the better approach for younger kids. In the 'Spam Filters by Address' menu, choose *Allow mail only from addresses I specify*. Next, type the address of each person who is allowed to e-mail your child (school friends, family members), clicking *Add* after each one. If your little one receives a message from someone not on the list, the server will automatically delete it or route it to the Spam folder, depending on which option you select. Note that AOL also lets you block any mail containing pictures or files.

Unfortunately, AOL doesn't give you a way to block outbound e-mail. But it does give you control over instant messaging, chat rooms, and downloads, and even lets you set up connection-time limits and retrieve activity reports. Not bad, given the price tag: It's all free.

When you're done with setup, head to the AOL site and show your son or daughter how to sign in, check and send e-mail, add contacts, and so on. It's an uncluttered, easy-to-use environment, one that kids should take to in no time. And it offers the peace of mind that comes from knowing that your child's inbox will remain free of unsuitable stuff.

## Live From Microsoft, It's Family Safety!

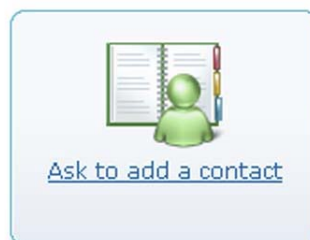
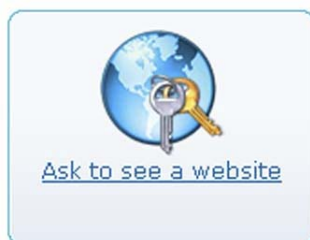
I'm not sure who borrowed the playbook from whom, but Microsoft's [Windows Live Family Safety](#) works a lot like AOL's Parental Controls do. First, you sign up for a Windows Live ID for both yourself and your child. (Doing so nets you individual Windows Live Hotmail accounts.) Then, you install Microsoft's Family Safety software. And finally, you configure everything by way of a Web control panel.



Windows Live Family Safety can set limits for Windows Live Spaces and Windows Live Messenger.

Getting started with Family Safety is pretty straightforward: Click the *Get Started* button and follow the prompts. You can create a Windows Live ID if you need one or sign in with an existing one. Either way, you'll land at the Family Safety settings page, where you can add one or more children and, if desired, another parent. (Why should you have all the fun?) This is also the place to create a trusted-contacts list, one that dictates who's approved to send e-mail to your child as well as who your child can e-mail. That gives Windows Live a slight edge over AOL, which offers only inbound protection.

What can I do?



[Why am I seeing this page?](#)


Kids can ask your permission if they want to add another contact to their approved-senders list.

What happens if Junior wants to contact, say, a new school friend who isn't on the contact list? He can visit the Family Safety site and ask your permission via e-mail or even instant message. When you receive the request, you can hop onto the Family Safety site and--if the new kid checks out--give your digital blessing on the spot.

If there's a drawback to giving your child a Family Safety-protected Windows Live Hotmail account, it's that the Web interface lacks KOL's kid-friendliness. It isn't complicated by any means, but younger users may find it intimidating.

Hey, Microsoft: You have the parental controls down pat--now how about offering a Windows Live "Kidmail" interface with oversize buttons and cutesy icons?

## From A to ZooBuh



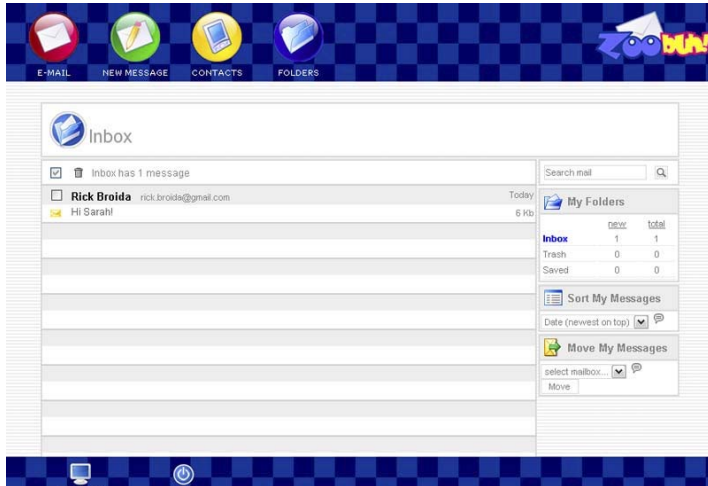
The screenshot shows the 'add a child' registration form on the ZooBuh website. At the top, there is a blue circular icon with a cartoon animal face and the text 'add a child'. Below this is the 'Child Information' section, which contains several input fields and explanatory text:

- ZooBuh Name:** \* sarahb @zoobuh.com. This will be the login name and the @zoobuh.com mail name. No spaces. Alphanumeric (a-z, 0-9).
- Password:** \* s1a1r1a1h. Assign the password to use. There aren't any restrictions on the password. We suggest something that your child can easily remember.
- Real Name:** Sarah Broida. This is the real name (confidential). This information will not be published to the public.
- Display Name:** Sarah B. This is what others will see (public). This information can be viewed by those that receive emails from this child.
- Birthdate:** 01 / 07 / 2000 (mm/dd/yyyy). We will send your child a birthday card on their special day. (optional).

A note at the bottom of the form states: '\* is required'. Below the form is an information box with an 'i' icon: 'After you add this account, you will be taken to the options screen where you can adjust the settings for this account.' At the bottom left, there is a blue 'Add Child' button.

ZooBuh makes setting up e-mail accounts for kids a snap--and it gives parents plenty of information along the way.

If it sounds like AOL and Microsoft make you jump through considerable hoops to set up child-safe e-mail accounts, it's because, well, they do. That's why I'm partial to [ZooBuh](#), a Web-based mail service designed expressly with young users in mind. It's a cinch to set up, it offers more and better controls than AOL or Microsoft do, and it requires no extra software.



ZooBuh provides a colorful, child-friendly interface.

ZooBuh gives you total control over your children's e-mail universe. By default they can receive mail only from users in the approved-contact list and can send mail only to those same approved users--but you can change either setting as you see fit. You can have copies of incoming or outgoing messages sent to your e-mail address, remove images or links from your child's received mail, and block some or all attachments. ZooBuh also has a bad-words filter, with a box for adding your own unwanted words.



For really young users, ZooBuh offers a stripped-down e-mail interface with just four buttons.

Both AOL and Microsoft offer controls more or less on a par with those, but what really sets ZooBuh apart is its interface: It's colorful, simplistic, and blissfully free of advertising. It even has an Easy version, aimed at younger users, that's even more colorful and simplistic. In short, this is what e-mail for kids should look like.

As you might have guessed by now, ZooBuh isn't free--but it's admirably inexpensive. Following a 30-day trial (which doesn't require a credit card), the service charges just \$1 per month for each account. That's a small price to pay for safe, child-friendly e-mail that takes all of about 5 minutes to set up. Your kids will thank you.