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It's being called a cultural phenomenon, the role of technology in our children's lives. From iPads and iPhones, today's kids can be connected anytime and anyplace with the simple click of a button. Just last year, in fact, *PC World* claimed the iPad would be the No. 1 Christmas gift for kids. And if a recent UK survey by Westcoastcloud is any indication, kids just might be Apple's fastest growing consumer.

*Check in each week for MASK's Dialed In Dad and Minute with Mom series.*

As moms, we always know something's up when our home suddenly becomes quiet, especially if you have three young children like me. Around here, it can mean the kids are deep into Play Doh creations, writing stories or sneaking out of the house (it's a long story).

But what I discovered my children doing last Christmas was almost as shocking as them sneaking out of the house. They were on my husband's iPad, the brand new one I had just gotten him for Christmas. I was panicked! It cost me a fortune and sure wasn't meant to be used as a toy. But when I realized they had figured out how to get online to search Google and use YouTube, I was stunned. Who knew getting online was that quick and simple to do? In a matter of minutes, my kids figured out how to get online and potentially be exposed to things I've never heard of.

A few months later, I was at a conference in Chicago. My phone vibrated and I looked to find a "contact card" being sent to me with my son's name and photo. Thankfully, it was my son who sent it. But the shock was realizing he did it all by himself, while my husband slept soundly in the next room.

The tech world is moving lightening fast and our kids are keeping pace. The Westcoastcloud survey reveals that 1 in 10 UK elementary school students has an iPhone and 1 in 20 own an iPad. Even more staggering, *Consumer Reports* recently reported 7.5 million Facebook users under the age of 13, which is a violation of federal law.

We gave our twin boys each an iTouch for their birthday and downloaded "mostly" educational games (hey, everyone loves Angry Birds). But before handing over Red and his feathered friends, I got a tutorial in using the parental controls. I turned off Safari, e-mail, YouTube, all locator services, multiplayer games, movies with ratings over PG, explicit music, downloading apps and iTunes. I also put passwords on all of our electronics. Despite these safety measures, however, I still fear they'll find some way around it and discover things online I never knew existed.

It's only been a few months since we've allowed the kids to use the laptop and iPad. Like many of you, we're just trying to stay one step ahead of the kids. We keep our computers and devices in the kitchen, limit the amount of time the kids can get on them, and maintain an open dialog about what they're seeing and why safety and privacy are important. As the years pass, we know that job will get harder and harder.

For now, we're protecting our passwords with our lives and enjoying the giggles and squeals of delight that come from the kids dive bombing monkeys with birds and the pleasure they get from this little taste of freedom.