

Computers, Kids, & Spyware

As computers become more prevalent in the home and high speed connections continue to grow this combination of computers, kids, and spyware becomes an increasingly bad combination. Many parents have first hand experience on bringing home a new computer to only have to take it back to the store or to a local computer shop 6 months later to be cleaned and brought back to life.

So what exactly is spyware? If you're like most people you might have heard of it but aren't quite sure what it is. Unfortunately most all computer users know the symptoms of spyware:

- long computer startup and shutdown times
- slow or intermittent internet connections
- popup ads without even browsing the Internet
- redirected browser home page (usually some search site)
- poor computer performance

Spyware is a term that is often mixed with other descriptions like adware and can be defined as any program that changes your computer settings, displays advertising, gathers personal information, and /or monitors Internet behavior without your knowledge and consent. Spyware applications are typically bundled as a hidden component of freeware or shareware programs that can be downloaded from the Internet or they are part of popup ads displayed while online.

Recent independent studies by American Online and EarthLink show that up to 90% of computers with Internet connections have spyware installed on them with an average of 28 spyware programs per machine. And the number of spyware programs being developed continues to rise.

Unfortunately the makers of spyware programs are aggressively targeting kids. Earlier this year Symantec Corp., a leading Antivirus vendor, conducted an unscientific experiment by connecting a brand new computer to the Internet and browsing online for an hour. After visiting several web sites suited for kids the computer was infected with 359 different pieces of spyware causing the machine to slow considerably and become overrun by pop-up ads.

The simple truth is kids are gullible and easy targets for deceptive advertising. Kids, more than adults, are scouring the Internet for free games, instant message add-ons like emotion icons, peer to peer file sharing apps, and a wealth of other goodies. Spyware makers are tempting kids with pop-up ads claiming to be spyware cleaners, fancy screen savers, computer performance enhancers, free music and movie offers, or whatever the latest must have craze is. All it takes is one click of these ads and the computer is on its way to a slow but all too common disaster.

Fortunately there are some steps, short of disconnecting the computer from the Internet or banning the kids from touching it, that can be taken to help protect your computer, kids, and personal information.

1. - Keep your computer up to date with the latest Microsoft updates and patches. This should be done at least weekly by visiting <http://windowsupdate.microsoft.com> or using one of the built in links in Internet Explorer. Although there is the occasional problem of one of these updates impacting the functionality of your computer it's usually worth the risk versus not installing them at all.
2. - Purchase an antivirus / antispyware program and more importantly check it weekly to make sure the program definitions are up to date and installed properly. These programs include vendors such as Norton, McAfee, and Trend Micro which all new versions from each vendor include antispyware defenses.
3. - Consider a stand alone antispyware program such as Spybot Search & Destroy, Ad-aware SE, or Microsoft Antispyware beta. Again is important to check it weekly to ensure the program definitions are up to date and installed properly.
4. - Install a popup blocking program. There are several free versions available including an integrated blocker in Windows XP SP2 as well as numerous commercial programs, all of which perform decently.
5. - Consider installing an Internet browser other than Microsoft Internet Explorer such as Firefox, Mozilla, or Opera.

Of course even following the steps above isn't going to guarantee you remain spyware free but those combined with a little knowledge of the issues will definitely minimize the chances of disaster striking.

SecurityCoverage is a privately owned company in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, that provides automated computer security services for home and small businesses. Introduced in January 2004, SecureIT and SecureITPlus provide a set of computer protection services that focus on stopping and eliminating Internet security threats without any user interaction. These services provide fully managed virus and spyware protection, automated Microsoft Windows updates, an integrated popup blocker and ongoing hard drive maintenance and optimization for faster computer performance.

Robert O'Dell, founder and CEO, leads SecurityCoverage. O'Dell was one of Iowa's first certified security professionals (CISSP) and has been involved in information technology, information security, product development and company management for the past seven eight.