Do I need to use parental controls for my young kids online?

Some very basic parental controls are a good idea, are simple to set, and will put you at ease. These can be as basic as using safe search on Google or installing a basic content filter on your web browser. If you're supervising your young kids while they're online, this is probably all you need; more complex controls can sometimes get in kids' way by blocking harmless content.

To figure out whether you need more robust parental controls, consider how much time your kids spend online, how much supervision you can provide while they're online, how technically savvy they are, and whether they have a history of searching for age-inappropriate stuff.

If you decide you want extra controls, research the different parental controls in the marketplace, many of which require a monthly subscription. These include filters that are constantly updated and include screen-time-management features. Some parental controls also offer entertaining, useful, and educational features for kids, making the controls feel more like a fun tool than a lockbox. Many parental-control products also will send you updates on what's been searched generally, whether certain terms were searched (such as "drugs"), and how much time your kid spent doing what.

The downside to parental controls -- other than cost -- is that they can provide a false sense of security. Determined kids can defeat them, and the filters are often *too* good, blocking out plenty of harmless stuff.

Your ultimate goal is to raise kids who use the Internet safely and responsibly and think critically about their actions, but a little technical assistance can help. And, as your kids get older, you'll need to dial down the restrictions to help them develop their own sense of responsibility.