

Out Of Control!

Taking back control of your internet.

When the kids were small, we had a hard time trying to come up with the best way to ensure that they could use the internet freely, but not wind up in unsavory areas on the web. Net Nanny and Content Barrier were both software that we used at one point to try to safeguard their web use. Both were cumbersome, difficult to use, and only resided on the computer the kids used. That computer was set up in the living room, so it was pretty easy to oversee the usage anyhow.

As the kids grew, and technology marched forward, iPads, smart phones, and laptop computers became a standard for both kids in our household. With the proliferation of so many devices, and the fact that they were no longer sitting in the living room, overseeing proper and safe usage was a parental nightmare! It seemed impossible to get a handle on it. The distraction of Facebook, Youtube, and other features of the internet were sometimes making it difficult for the kids to get their school work done. Ever experience that? Can you ban them from the computer until they finish their homework? No, in our house the kids need the internet for their school work. Yes, there are parental controls you can 'turn on' on your kids devices, but how long do you think it takes them to figure out how to turn them back off? What I found was every time that they upgraded their ios, everything was reset anyway. Trying to control each individual device is not practical or easy. I wanted easy, quick and effective!

Trying to get a handle on it

We were quite frustrated, and couldn't find anyone who had a good solution. I wanted to have a way to shut down social networking and a few other sites if the kids were not doing their homework, and then easily turn it back on when they were done. I tried a 'parental control' router, but I found these ineffective for devices such as iPads or phones. They could prevent access to certain websites, like Facebook, on a computer, but iPads and phones use 'apps' to connect to social networking, and I had no success shutting them down. How about imessage (apple users). Here's one that's a real trick to try to shut down. In short, the parental control router was buggy and about 25% effective at best.

All of this had me searching in vain all over the internet. All I could find was other frustrated parents and teachers (believe it or not) trying to find a way to do the same thing that I wanted to do. The only recommendations were the products that I had already found ineffective. Being kind of a computer hack myself, I figured I would go in a different direction and come up with a multi-pronged solution for myself.

The Fix is In

I did some research and experimented with many different techniques to develop a solution(s) over the last year that works beautifully for us. It gives almost everything we want.

Here's a quick overview of what we can do with our home network now.

1. **Sensible protection:** Filter all of the content by category for the network that the kids are connected to. I use this for basically filtering out hard core pornography, gambling, or other categories that we feel might not be age appropriate. This is done without affecting the network mine and my wife's devices use.
2. **Distraction defense:** We can shut down any messaging service, social networking site or any category of sites just for the kids computers and devices, and they can still use the rest of the internet for home work. Again, this only affects the kids devices and computers. Pretty slick I thought.
3. **Impose an internet Time-out:** We can easily turn the entire internet access on or off for just one, or both kids on demand. This is great for getting their attention if they're not doing what they are supposed to be doing.
4. **Set up separate access timers per child:** Our kids are a couple of years apart. They have different sleep schedules and distraction levels. On our system, we can set up timers for each day to turn the internet off during certain hours. The timers are different for each child.
5. **Control it all from anywhere:** This one is crucial. As long as we have internet or cell phone access, we can turn on, off or adjust any of these controls above. So, if I'm out to dinner I need to make an adjustment (maybe someone finished their homework) I can do it from my phone easily.

Any of this sound attractive?

For us, it has given us some way to help guide (or motivate) the kids when needed. Facebook, iMessage, kik....you name it, all seem to be out to defeat parental controls. It's like a hydra. As soon as you figure out what port or site to

block, they add a few more and it takes months figure them out. Trying to stay ahead of the kids on this was seemingly impossible, and most folks have just given up.

It took some work, but our system has been the only one we've used that has performed the way we want it to, been easy to use, and so far, not defeat-able by the kids.

The First Building Block

To describe my entire setup would take a book, so I'll start small. I'm going to tell you here about the first step that I took. There is one service out there (that I found in my searches) to be a great building block as I started to build the system we have now. It's free, it's easy, and anyone can use it. It's a DNS service called OpenDNS.

“Sounds Great! Wait, what is a DNS?” You're thinking

To implement OpenDNS, you need a basic understanding of DNS. DNS stands for Dynamic Name Server. These are just big computers that every device on the internet connects to in order to translate a website name (like www.google.com) into a number that a computer can understand. For instance you type in www.google.com and a DNS changes it to 74.125.25.104 for computer talk. Every device on the internet is 'pointed' at a DNS for this translation service. You can set it yourself manually on your device, but most devices are set to automatically accept a DNS to use 'as-assigned' by the router that they connect to.

OpenDNS (www.opendns.org) allows you to use their servers for free and they do a lot of the leg work for you in terms of filtering content. Unless you've changed it, your home computer, ipads, phones etc. are all using a DNS that is as-

Web Content Filtering

Choose your filtering level

- High** Protects against all adult-related sites, illegal activity, social networking sites, video sharing sites, and general time-wasters. 26 categories in this group - [View](#) - [Customize](#)
- Moderate** Protects against all adult-related sites and illegal activity. 13 categories in this group - [View](#) - [Customize](#)
- Low** Protects against pornography. 4 categories in this group - [View](#) - [Customize](#)
- None** Nothing blocked.
- Custom** Choose the categories you want to block.

<input type="checkbox"/> Academic Fraud	<input type="checkbox"/> Adult Themes	<input type="checkbox"/> Adware
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alcohol	<input type="checkbox"/> Anime/Manga/Webcomic	<input type="checkbox"/> Auctions
<input type="checkbox"/> Automotive	<input type="checkbox"/> Blogs	<input type="checkbox"/> Business Services
<input type="checkbox"/> Chat	<input type="checkbox"/> Classifieds	<input type="checkbox"/> Dating
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Drugs	<input type="checkbox"/> Ecommerce/Shopping	<input type="checkbox"/> Educational Institutions
<input type="checkbox"/> File Storage	<input type="checkbox"/> Financial Institutions	<input type="checkbox"/> Forums/Message boards
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Gambling	<input type="checkbox"/> Games	<input type="checkbox"/> German Youth Protection
<input type="checkbox"/> Government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hate/Discrimination	<input type="checkbox"/> Health and Fitness
<input type="checkbox"/> Humor	<input type="checkbox"/> Instant Messaging	<input type="checkbox"/> Jobs/Employment
<input type="checkbox"/> Lingerie/Bikini	<input type="checkbox"/> Movies	<input type="checkbox"/> Music
<input type="checkbox"/> News/Media	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-Profits	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Nudity
<input type="checkbox"/> P2P/File sharing	<input type="checkbox"/> Parked Domains	<input type="checkbox"/> Photo Sharing
<input type="checkbox"/> Podcasts	<input type="checkbox"/> Politics	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pornography
<input type="checkbox"/> Portals	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Proxy/Anonymizer	<input type="checkbox"/> Radio
<input type="checkbox"/> Religious	<input type="checkbox"/> Research/Reference	<input type="checkbox"/> Search Engines
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sexuality	<input type="checkbox"/> Social Networking	<input type="checkbox"/> Software/Technology
<input type="checkbox"/> Sports	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tasteless	<input type="checkbox"/> Television
<input type="checkbox"/> Tobacco	<input type="checkbox"/> Travel	<input type="checkbox"/> Video Sharing
<input type="checkbox"/> Visual Search Engines	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Weapons	<input type="checkbox"/> Web Spam
<input type="checkbox"/> Webmail		

Looking for [security categories?](#)

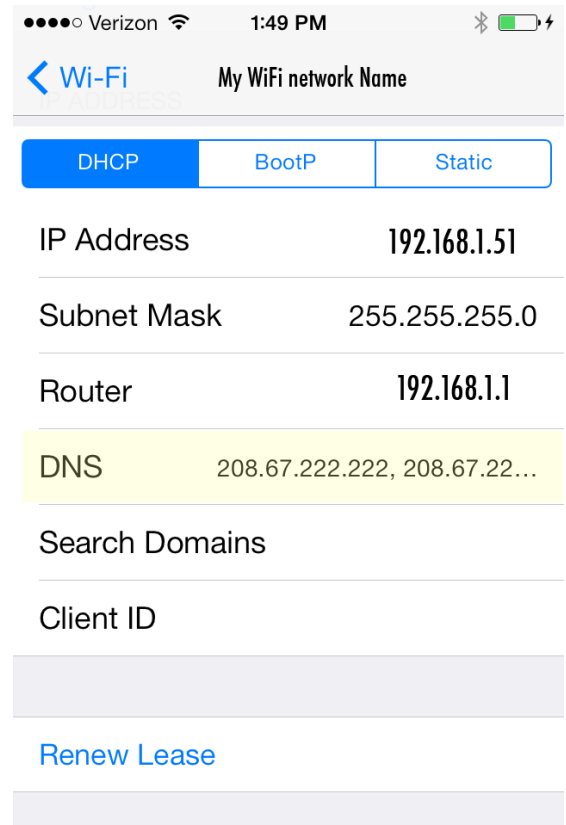
List of categories on OpenDNS

signed to your network by your internet provider. You can change that setting on each device if you want, or you can change that setting for your whole network by changing it on your router.

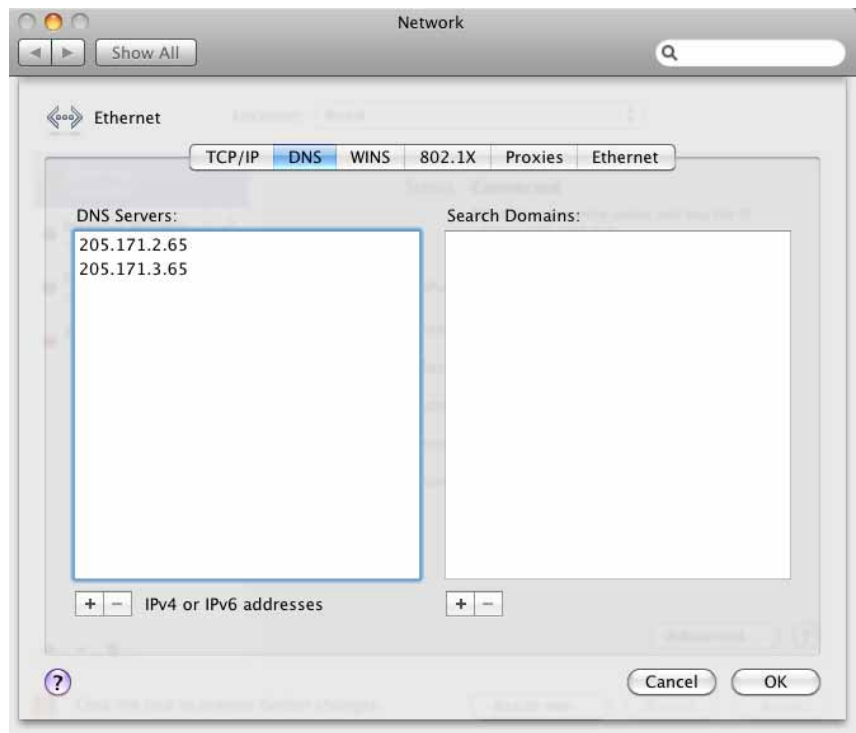
Once you have your free account set up at OpenDNS, and you are using their servers, you just have to log into your OpenDNS account and select your filter settings. They have some suggested categories that you can just select if you want, and then you can customize it as you wish. You can block access to one specific website, or entire category. You can log in and edit settings easily and quickly from anywhere that you have internet service.

Control of who gets filtered and who doesn't

Now, what if you want to point your entire network to OpenDNS to capture all of the kid's devices, but as the parent, you want to keep your internet access unfiltered? This is easy to do with any current equipment setup in your home right now. You simply log into your modem/router and point the DNS settings to OpenDNS. This will assign any device that connects to your internet connection the OpenDNS servers. Then, you can select 'manual' on your personal devices and enter a different DNS to override the automatic assignment. For instance, Google's DNS numbers are 8.8.8.8. These are easy to remember. Your manual entry of the DNS will override the router's automatic assignment.



*iPhone DNS Settings
Settings / Wi-Fi / info / DHCP*



*Macintosh computer DNS Settings
System Preferences / Network / Advanced / DNS*

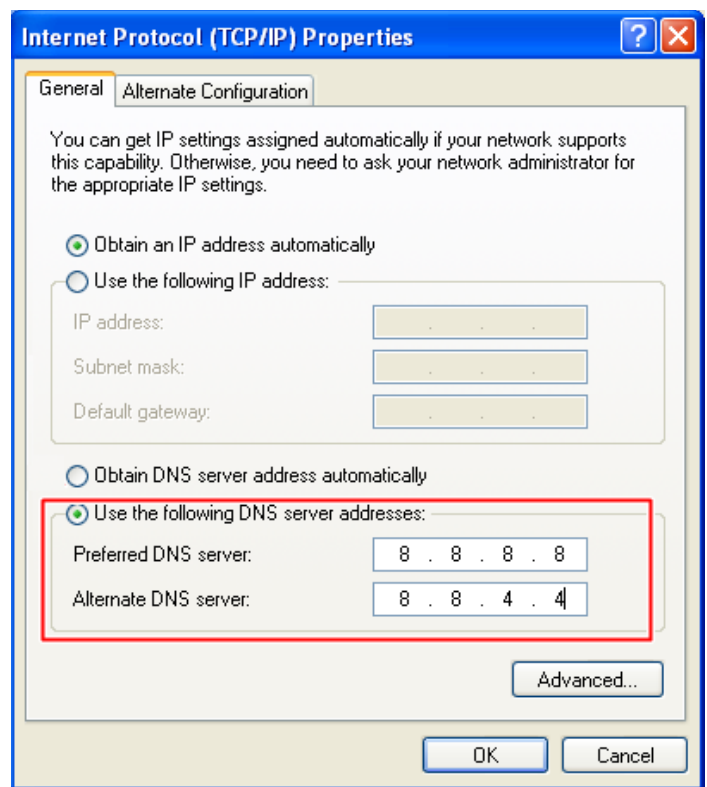
With a little knowledge of DNS and how it works, you can easily set your entire network to a filtered DNS service and override on your personal computer or devices. What if you have really smart, computer savvy kids though. Can they figure out how to get around the filtered DNS manually? The answer is yes, but from what I've found, most kids are as in the dark about what a DNS is as most adults.

Those pesky kids

For those of you who might have technically advanced kids who will figure out how to override their own device DNS settings (this is our situation), you can still have the same separation. It's a problem that can also be solved with basic added equipment and knowledge. Separate controls for different kids, timers, locking the DNS for the kids networks but not your own... all can be done in a way that is easy and quick to control...also from anywhere. It's not so easy to setup though. It involves separate routers, flashed firmware, more study of DHCP and IP addressing, etc....

How about cell data? If your kids cannot use their wifi for what they want to do, then they can use their cell data. We've been able to set controls on that as well, but that's a whole other subject at this point. We use a cell phone provider that has data controls that we can access.

I hope that the OpenDNS is a tool that can help all of you in the same way that it helped us to start a secure, customizable, controllable network for our teen kids. I am actually considering starting a consulting business in this area. Aside from OpenDNS, I couldn't find resource who could help us do what we needed to do.



Windows XP DNS settings