How often nowadays do we run into the trite cautionary tale about strangers on the Internet? In our present-day, anxiety-laden manual on how to navigate the Internet, we've always relied on one particular axiom: that strangers are dangerous, especially when you find them on the Internet.

Of course, our modern society has become more and more accepting of all kinds of technologies and their usage, which means we've been able to view strangers on the Internet in a different light. As use of the Internet becomes more prominent across the world, people continue to learn more about it each day. Younger and younger generations have become more knowledgeable about working the terrains of the online world, and speaking as a younger person myself, strangers on the Internet become less and less of a caricature, and more and more real. Instead of floating voices of doom, strangers on the Internet become interesting people, with thoughts and motivations—indeed, people who are in the same situation as I.

As a parent, the feeling of anxiety and worry might not come as unfamiliar to some of you, especially when the Internet is involved. This is normal; you're putting trust into people and hoping that strangers, whose actions and opinions you have no control over, won't harm your child. This topic raises several issues about the safety of Internet communication, particularly where social media are concerned.

Should I regard every person I meet on the Internet with caution?

This is challenging concept for most, because the Internet can be thought of as a continent: it amasses millions of different cultures, sub-cultures and people with different mindsets. That answer depends fundamentally on which websites you visit, and what you're looking for. Certainly, you should be aware of what you say and how you react to others, but the Internet isn't full of bad people. It should be known that caution is a precursory action to take, rather than a position we stay in forever.

How much information about myself can I reveal to people online?

The answer should be obvious: as little as possible. Unless it is an online dating website verified as safe (and assuming you are older than 18), you don't want to give others important factual information about yourself. This, however, doesn't mean we can't have honest conversations with friendly strangers online. Students should take precaution when visiting sites that are often in the 'seedy underbelly' of the Internet—sites like 4chan and Chatroulette—because they are hard to control and filter out.

(If you're a parent) How do I keep my child safe from online predators?

Perhaps instead of scaring children with horror stories from the Internet, we should be honest: good and bad are both present throughout the world, and the Internet is no exception. The first rule is to guard your identity. Your identity is the most valuable thing to you online, because once it's released, you are uncertain of how the information can be treated and where it can end up. The second rule is to be aware of the unpredictability of strangers online because the Internet *is* a mystery, as stubbornly inconvenient as that is, and any effort to fight against it is futile. If you're a worried parent, tell your child about the various 'dangerous sites' after you've done some research into it. As opposed to banning them from said sites-they might eventually find their way onto the site some day-consider promoting awareness of the sites before they go online, so that they won't be shocked or frightened by any of the possible things they would encounter.

To conclude this, it's a worthwhile reminder to say that the people online aren't all monsters. Online communities can be formed to support a general movement, like the recent example where Facebook users would use an equality sign as their display picture to advocate their support for the gay community. Friendships can be created in chat forums; cross-cultural relationships can be started over a mutual love for a topic. Social change can be sparked through keystrokes. Peace groups can form as a silent army of good simply through Facebook. All this demonstrates a lot of elements of the IB Learner Profile: the idea of being a global citizen, an inquirer, a knowledgeable learner and perhaps even a risk taker. Of course, throughout it all, we mustn't forget the need to develop close relationship ties with the people we already know. Online communication should serve to bring people together, like distant relatives or old friends from years passed. In other words, we mustn't forget the power technology has of bringing people we know closer to us, and not just bringing us closer to different people.

It's important to be aware of both the good and the bad when it comes to strangers online. After all, the beauty of online communication is also its undoing: the idea that we can talk and connect with anyone in the world.