

November 3, 2010

For our first GetParentalControls.org product review roundup, we decided to test the most common type of parental controls, web filtering. We invited 20 companies listed in the [GetParentalControls.org Product Guide](#) to participate. Nine companies submitted products: Bit Defender Total Security; BrightFilter; BSecure Online; CyberPatrol; K9 Web Protection; Net Nanny; Norton Online Family; Optenet; and Safe Eyes. We tested for filtering accuracy, security, manageability, and features, and scored each product on a scale of one to five stars. We gave out three awards – Editor’s Choice; Most Secure; and Most Accurate.

<b>Net Nanny</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5	<b>Winner: Editor’s Choice Award, Most Secure Award</b>
<b>BSecure Online</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆☆½ of 5	
<b>Norton Online Family</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆☆½ of 5	
<b>Safe Eyes</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆☆½ of 5	
<b>CyberPatrol</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆☆ of 5	
<b>K9 Web Protection</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆☆ of 5	<b>Winner: Most Accurate Award</b>
<b>BitDefender</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆½ of 5	
<b>BrightFilter</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆½ of 5	
<b>Optenet</b> ( <a href="#">full review</a> )	☆☆☆½ of 5	

### **Accuracy: Outstanding filtering of pornography and search results, but middling filtering of violent sites**

When web filtering first became available in the early 1990s, the technology was controversial because early filtering was sometimes of poor quality. Since the beginning, web filters have been primarily focused on blocking pornographic sites, and the years of effort show: today’s web filters are highly effective at blocking commercial pornography sites. The nine filters we tested blocked between 97 and 100 percent of our sample of commercial pornography sites, consistent with other recent filtering tests that score in the mid to high 90s.

In the past, highly effective filtering of pornography sites has come at the price of blocking sites with legitimate content related to sexuality and sexual health. Again, the filters showed how they’ve improved, as most of the filters blocked between zero and seven percent of sexual education and health sites like sexhealth.org and realsexfacts.com.

However, the filters still aren’t effective enough at blocking content like violence. Because customer demand has focused so much attention on pornographic content, other types of inappropriate content aren’t always as well covered. We tested a sample of well-known “gore” sites such as sickview.com and bloody-disgusting.com, two sites many of these filters missed. Most of the filters blocked between 77 percent and 87 percent of these sites, good, but not good enough for protecting young children.

Another area where web filtering has been criticized in the past is the failure of some filters to effectively block often highly explicit search engine results. All but one of the products we tested were very effective at blocking pornographic search terms, most using a combination of locking in the “safe search” settings for major search engines and their own keyword filtering.

### **Security: Most blocked the easy hacks, but many were vulnerable to sophisticated attacks**

Popular folk wisdom among many “technophiles” holds that today’s generation of “digital natives” can easily circumvent parental controls with a few mouse clicks. What we found was that reliably circumventing most of these products is difficult.

We tested ten publicly available filter circumvention techniques against the filters. We first tested a number of simple tricks almost anyone could perform, such as the use of publicly available free proxies; search engine caches; online translation sites; Internet archive sites, and reverse IP lookups. Then we used a battery of advanced techniques, including unknown secure proxies, SSL VPN clients, efforts to halt the product at the command line, and dedicated circumvention client software running on a USB stick.

Most of the products effectively thwarted the simple techniques, with only two of the products allowing access through caches and online translators. All of the products block well-known free proxy sites like Anonymizer.com, and for the most part these products kept up well in blocking the latest publicly available proxies.

However, when we used a proxy site that wasn't in the filtering database of these products, only two of them - Net Nanny and K9 Web Protection, were able to completely filter the results, while Bit Defender was only partly effective. Other advanced techniques such as the use of circumvention clients designed to avoid network-based filters were mostly ineffective, and all of the products had taken steps to stop their software from being halted by the user through various commands.

While the "filters are easily circumvented" notion didn't appear to hold up in our testing, we did find that a determined, sophisticated user can find ways to circumvent most of these products, though the online experience they will have in most cases probably won't be satisfying. Net Nanny was the only product that resisted all ten techniques, though it too would probably fall to a sophisticated user willing to go to extreme measures like reinstalling the operating system or creating a separate drive partition with a different operating system.

**Manageability and Features: Some products have a more mature feature set than others**

Some of the companies have been in the parental control business for a long time, and it shows. Most of the established products offer an intuitive, easy-to-manage interface. The one we liked the best was Safe Eye's Family Manager, which gives parents an overview of restrictions for games, the web, chat, and even online videos on a single screen. Parents shouldn't have to spend a lot of time figuring out how to manage parental controls, and products must balance capability with simplicity.

Reporting that informs parents what their children have been up to online varied the most, with some products like BSecure and Norton Online Family offering sophisticated, multi-tab screens with "drill down" ability, while others offer little more than a simple list of URLs. As parents worry about online conduct like cyberbullying, strong reporting features have become a must for any well-rounded parental control offering.

**Net Nanny**      **Editor's Choice Award, Most Secure Award**

Accuracy      ☆☆☆☆½ of 5

Security      ☆☆☆☆☆ of 5

Manageability      ☆☆☆☆☆ of 5

Features      ☆☆☆☆☆ of 5

**Overall**      ☆☆☆☆☆ of 5

**Summary**

Net Nanny is the best Internet parental control product we've yet seen. Net Nanny earned the first GetParentalControls.org Editor's Choice award, as well as the Most Secure award. Net Nanny has just about every feature a parent could want, along with robust filtering and a practically impenetrable security. The only weakness we found in Net Nanny was subpar blocking of explicitly violent sites, which prevented a complete sweep by Net Nanny of all three awards.

**Buy:**    <http://www.netnanny.com>

**Price:**    \$39.99

**Manageability**

Net Nanny walked me through a simple set of setup steps, suggesting pre-set levels of filtering based on age for the different members of the family. Making changes to the individual profiles, such as adding categories and blocking individual sites was easy. Net Nanny offers some nice reporting that allows parents to view a summary of web and social networking activity, and the option to "drill down" to examine specific web activity by hour, day, week, or month. Net Nanny also allows parents to set up automatic e-mails that warn of risky activity.

**Accuracy**

Net Nanny blocked all the commercial porn sites we threw at it, while leaving all the sexual health sites unblocked, a feat of accuracy few products can match. Net Nanny relies on both a database as well as real time analysis – a technique that often leads to noticeable over blocking, but not in the case of Net Nanny. Net Nanny's filtering of the major search engines worked flawlessly – nothing got through. However, Net Nanny's excellent filtering of sexual materials didn't work as well for explicitly violent sites, blocking just over half of them and other products. A representative from Content Watch informed me that the company is developing "a new heuristic learning algorithm that will improve the performance in that category."

**Security**

Net Nanny handled every hacking technique we threw at it – even when we ran in Windows Administrator mode. Net Nanny easily handles simple circumvention tricks like proxies, search engine caches and translation sites. Rather than simply blocking these sites, Net Nanny filters through them, allowing children the benefit of online translation without creating a loophole in the filtering. Most of Net Nanny's competitors handle anonymous proxies by playing "whack a mole" and blocking the individual proxy sites. Net Nanny moves past the competition here by analyzing traffic through proxies and blocking them in real time. Net Nanny applies the same technique to even thwart SSL VPN clients, and filtering circumvention clients like Paper Bus and Ultra Surf.

**Features**

Net Nanny offers a rich array of features, including time management that lets parents set up pre-set limits on use, control over which online games by can be run, controls for applications, Instant Messaging, and social networks.

## Norton Online Family

Accuracy	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5
Security	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5
Manageability	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5
Features	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5
<b>Overall</b>	☆☆☆☆½ of 5

### Summary

Norton Online Family is among the newest of the parental control products, but it doesn't lag behind its more established competitors, and in some ways it surpasses them. Leveraging Symantec's security expertise, Norton Online Family is built on a solid foundation with good security and accuracy. Where Norton shines is in the thoughtful, comprehensive approach it takes to monitoring and controlling the entire online experience.

**Buy:** <http://onlinefamily.norton.com>

**Price:** Free

### Manageability

Set up was straightforward, but it required the creation of extra Windows accounts to match user profiles, a step that has big security advantages but can cause inconveniences for many home users. The web-based administrative interface is attractive and easy to navigate. Norton Online Family stores all information online, so it allows remote access and the ability to manage multiple computers. Norton Online Family offers some of the best online reporting we saw, including tables with multiple options like the ability to sort by column.

### Accuracy

Norton Online Family was among the most accurate of all the products tested. Norton blocked 99 percent of the pornography sites, among the best of nine products tested, and blocked 77 percent of the violent websites. Norton's overblocking was slight – just 3 percent of the sexual health sites.

### Security

Symantec has a lot of experience with security, so it wasn't a surprise that Norton's security was strong. Norton handled search engine caches, translators, proxies, circumvention clients, and attempts to halt the system. But like most of the parental controls, Norton only blocks proxies that are on the product's blacklist, so we were able to access blocked material with an unlisted proxy.

### Features

Norton shines with a strong set of features, such as the ability to monitor activity remotely for different events such as Instant Messaging, web access, and even online videos. Norton also offers some privacy options many parents will appreciate, with the ability to block private information such as name, address, and social security number.

## Safe Eyes

Accuracy	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5
Security	☆☆☆½ of 5
Manageability	☆☆☆½ of 5
Features	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5
<b>Overall</b>	<b>☆☆☆☆½ of 5</b>

### Summary

Safe Eyes is one of the best parental control products around with excellent filtering of not just web pages, but online TV and videos as well. Safe Eyes does a great job of providing a rich, detailed feature set while at the same time presenting a management screen that's simple to administer. Safe Eyes isn't quite as secure as some of the other products, but good enough for most families.

**Buy:** <http://www.internetsafety.com>

**Price:** \$49.99

### Manageability

Safe Eyes comes with an easy setup and lots of options. We really liked Safe Eye's Family Manager, which gives parents an overview of restrictions for games, the web, chat, and even online videos on a single screen. Safe Eyes applies the same approach to reporting, giving parents an overview screen of their child's online activities in these same areas, so a parent can "drill down" into videos watched, e-mails sent, etc. SafeEyes stores all information online, so it allows parents remote access and the ability to manage multiple computers.

### Accuracy

Safe Eyes offers excellent web filtering that's close to the best in the industry. Safe Eyes blocked 97 percent of the pornography sites and 87 percent of the violent sites while overblocking only 7 percent of the sexual health sites. Safe Eyes successfully blocked all the explicit search terms we entered.

### Security

Safe Eyes security was pretty solid, but we found a couple of ways to circumvent the filtering. Safe Eyes approaches proxies the same way most parental controls do, by blocking them one at a time, and Safe Eyes has a very good list of the latest proxies. But Safe Eyes can't block proxies it doesn't know about, so when we used an unpublished proxy, we were able to view inappropriate sites. Safe Eyes also neither blocks nor filters language translators, which can also be used to avoid filtering.

### Features

Safe Eyes offers one of the best arrays of features, including time management, automatic alerts via e-mail or text message, and monitoring of not just the web, but IM, e-mail, and videos. Safe Eyes can also block online TV based on ratings. Safe Eyes doesn't block the transmission of private information such as name or phone number, but it does send parents an alert when this happens. Safe Eyes also offers some of the best online help available, with detailed answers and easily searchable help.

## **BSecure Online**

[Updated December 30, 2010]

Accuracy	☆☆☆☆½ of 5
Security	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Manageability	☆☆☆☆½ of 5
Features	☆☆☆☆ of 5
<b>Overall</b>	<b>☆☆☆☆½ of 5</b>

### **Summary**

BSecure's recently redesigned software has a lot to like: quality filtering; a strong set of features – including “Whole Home” filtering; a really intuitive management console with cross tabs; and good reporting. The security was very good, though BSecure can only block proxies it knows about.

**Buy:** <http://www.bsecure.com>

**Price:** \$49.99 for 3 PCs

### **Manageability**

Setting up BSecure was a snap, and BSecure's unified management console with crosstabs is among the easiest and most intuitive we saw. BSecure offers an “Accountability” option for adults that cannot be undone – a nice feature for adults who are struggling with online addiction issues that none of the competitors offered. BSecure has solid web history reporting with lots of nice graphical reporting options.

### **Accuracy**

BSecure performed very well in blocking -- 97 percent of the pornography sites and 77 percent of the violent sites, while overblocking just 3 percent of the sexual health sites. Not perfect, but pretty good, and near the top of the competition. BSecure had the best search engine filtering we saw with a double layer of protection: BSecure locks safe search settings for Google, Bing, and Yahoo, and then has its own search engine filtering on top of that. When we were able to trip up Google's safe search, BSecure's search engine filtering kicked in and blocked it.

### **Security**

On our first test of BSecure, we found some ways to circumvent the filtering, which the company was in the process of correcting. We re-tested two months later, and confirmed that these loopholes had been closed by the company, making BSecure among the most secure filters. BSecure thwarted the downloading and execution of circumvention clients, and BSecure was very good at blocking proxies. But when we finally found a proxy that wasn't on its list, we were able to get through. BSecure further recommends that parents run Windows PCs in administrator mode, to block the installation of circumvention software such as Tor.

### **Features**

BSecure has a rich set of features. Unlike most every product for home computers, Bsecure offers “Whole Home Filtering” – which will filter any device connecting to a wireless network. Bsecure also offers filtering by rating for media, which is a nice feature. BSecure also features automatic alerts of visits to inappropriate sites and suspicious social networking activity, which can be set up for both e-mail and text messages. Once alerted, parents can click on Bsecure's social networking tab to automatically log in to their kids' accounts and see the full context of what's going on. Bsecure also offers iPad and iPhone filtering integrated to the management console.

## CyberPatrol

Accuracy	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Security	☆☆☆½ of 5
Manageability	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Features	☆☆☆☆½ of 5
<b>Overall</b>	<b>☆☆☆☆ of 5</b>

### Summary

CyberPatrol has been around since the mid-1990s, and the level of experiences shows – it's a solid, dependable product with a simple interface and an attractive set of features. It's not quite as secure or as accurate as some of the competition, but it still holds up quite well.

**Buy:** <http://www.cyberpatrol.com/>

**Price:** \$39.99

### Manageability

Although parents can create individual user profiles for each member of their family, CyberPatrol provides an immediate, out-of-the-box filtering profile called the Default user profile. Making changes to the default profile, such as adding sites, changing time management options, or restricting categories was simple. Reporting options include websites visited, the date and time, and whether the site was allowed or blocked.

### Accuracy

CyberPatrol did very well blocking at blocking pornography sites at 99%, but overblocked 3 percent of the sexual health sites. CyberPatrol blocked 70 percent of the violent sites, and caught all of the naughty search engine terms we entered.

### Security

CyberPatrol's security was decent, but as we found ways around the filtering. CyberPatrol approaches proxies the same way most parental controls do, by blocking them one at a time. But CyberPatrol doesn't block every proxy, so when we encountered a proxy that wasn't on its list, we were able to view blocked sites. CyberPatrol blocks language translators, an effective approach but not as good as some of the competition. CyberPatrol doesn't block or filter the Internet Archive, providing a way to view archived versions of banned sites.

### Features

CyberPatrol has a strong set of features, including password override; block/ allow/ monitor sites option; time management; and the ability to block applications such as Instant Messaging and games.

## K9 Web Protection from Blue Coat

## Most Accurate Award

Accuracy	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5
Security	☆☆☆☆☆ of 5
Manageability	☆☆☆ of 5
Features	☆☆ of 5
<b>Overall</b>	<b>☆☆☆☆☆ of 5</b>

### Summary

Since we don't expect a lot from free Internet parental control products, we were pleasantly surprised by the accurate filtering of K9 that earned the Most Accurate Award, as well as the robust security. What stops K9 from being a great product is its weak feature set. Key features common to other Internet parental controls such as multiple filtering profiles and auto alerts are missing. If all parents need is accurate and secure web filtering, this is the product for them, with an unbeatable price.

**Buy:** <http://www.k9webprotection.com/>

**Price:** Free

### Manageability

Setting up K9 was simple. After installing a lightweight download from the Internet, K9 led to a web-based interface where we were directed to default settings. The filtering offers lots of categories, some a little odd such as "Travel," and "Real Estate," and some very useful to parents such as "Social networking," and "Email." Unlike nearly every other parental control product, there's only one configuration of settings for all users, so if parents share a computer with their kids, they will get the same filtering they do, though K9 does have a password override feature parents can use to disable the filtering. There are a variety of options for configuring blocking options, including a feature that literally barks when kids try to access an inappropriate website.

### Accuracy

K9's parent company Blue Coat provides URL filtering for many big business customers worldwide, with the resulting filtering database being among the best in the business. Parents enjoy the benefits of Blue Coat's highly accurate database with K9 – a database so accurate it won our Most Accurate Award. K9 blocked 100 percent of the pornography, while blocking none of the sexual health sites, and 80 percent of the violent sites. K9's filtering of search engine results was perfect.

### Security

Blue Coat's security was nearly perfect in our test. Blue Coat handled search engine caches and online translators by filtering through them, an advanced method most products don't offer. We were able to halt K9 using Windows Task Manager, but this action caused all Internet access to halt until we restarted the computer, effectively thwarting the circumvention. K9 blocked me from downloading filtering circumvention client software, but when we downloaded a circumvention client from a USB stick in Administrator mode and installed it, we were able to partially evade the filtering, a situation parents can remedy by not running a machine for a youth in Administrator mode.

### Features

If K9 had a comparable feature set to products like Safe Eyes and Net Nanny, K9 would be a serious contender for the Editor's Choice award. While Blue Coat does offer basic reporting, the ability to add and delete sites, and time management, standard features offered by most other products are missing. Let's hope K9 can add such must-have features as the ability to have multiple user profiles, automatic e-mail alerts of inappropriate activity, and contact management.

## BitDefender Total Security 2011

Accuracy	☆☆½ of 5
Security	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Manageability	☆☆½ of 5
Features	☆☆☆☆ of 5
<b>Overall</b>	<b>☆☆☆☆½ of 5</b>

### Summary

BitDefender Total Security 2011 was the only software in this round-up that's not a dedicated parental control product. BitDefender is a "security suite" offering anti-virus, firewalling, privacy controls, etc. Security suites are a mixed blessing for parents – on the positive side, they offer tighter security and better privacy features, as well as better protection from sites that deliver malware. On the negative side, security suites sometimes have poorer quality filtering and weak manageability. So like other suites, BitDefender does offer strong security and privacy protections, but its heuristic filtering isn't as accurate as competitors, and it doesn't have the manageability of other products. BitDefender does offer a surprisingly strong set of features parents will like, so if they don't mind the overblocking, BitDefender is a solid product.

**Buy:** <http://www.bitdefender.com>

**Price:** \$49.99

### Manageability

Because BitDefender is a security suite with a lot features, set up is complex. BitDefender's parental controls screen offers a simple group of options for category selection, time settings, and monitoring reports. Monitoring reports don't offer the more detailed options of other products. Setting up automatic alerts required entering an e-mail password, which shouldn't be necessary to send e-mail notifications.

### Accuracy

BitDefender blocked 99 percent of the pornography sites, but the aggressive use of heuristics comes at a price – nearly half of the sexual health sites were blocked. BitDefender's heuristics didn't really work on the violent sites, blocking just 27 percent of them.

### Security

As one would expect from a security product, BitDefender's security was very strong. BitDefender handled everything in the test set – search engine caches, translators, proxies, circumvention clients, and attempts to halt the system. Like Net Nanny, BitDefender handles proxies by applying heuristics to the results – blocking most everything from getting through.

### Features

BitDefender's strong set of features came as a pleasant surprise. BitDefender offers some features many parental control products don't have, such as remote management; strong options for blocking the display of private information; and detailed control over applications. BitDefender also features standard parental control features like multiple profiles, time management, contact management, and automatic alerts.

## Brightfilter

Accuracy	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Security	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Manageability	☆☆☆½ of 5
Features	☆☆½ of 5
<b>Overall</b>	<b>☆☆☆½ of 5</b>

### Summary

Brightfilter is a solid product with an excellent filtering database, a simple management interface, and reasonable security. However, Brightfilter is missing some important features, such as the ability to filter search engine results and reporting of web browsing history. Once Brightfilter adds these features, it will be comparable to products like Net Nanny and Safe Eyes.

**Buy:** <http://www.brightfilter.com/>

**Price:** \$39.99

### Manageability

Brightfilter installed quickly, and setup was straightforward, although it required launching multiple screens when most products only require one. Once Brightfilter was setup, management was simple and offered a good selection of profile option and categories, although Brightfilter is missing some options offered by other products.

### Accuracy

Brightfilter's blocked 97 percent of the pornography sites and 87 percent of the violent sites, among the best of the nine products tested. Brightfilter overblocked 7 percent of the sexual health sites, which likely would only pose a minor inconvenience for most families. Brightfilter doesn't offer a way to block search engine results, a feature every other product tested had.

### Security

Brightfilter approaches proxies the same way most parental controls do, by blocking them one at a time. This approach works pretty well most of the time, but when Brightfilter encountered a proxy that wasn't on its list, we were able to view blocked sites. Brightfilter blocks language translators and Internet archives as anonymizers, an effective approach but not as good as the some of the competition. We were able to use Windows Task Manager to halt Brightfilter, but like other programs this halted Internet access until we restarted the computer, providing an effective deterrent.

### Features

Brightfilter's management console and database provide a solid foundation for a great parental control product, but Brightfilter is missing some key features offered by most parental control products. While Brightfilter offers multiple user profiles, time management, and the ability to add and delete individual sites, Brightfilter doesn't offer important features like reporting, automatic e-mail alerts of inappropriate activities, and search engine filtering.

## Optenet PC

Accuracy	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Security	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Manageability	☆☆☆☆ of 5
Features	☆☆☆½ of 5
<b>Overall</b>	<b>☆☆☆½ of 5</b>

### Summary

Optenet is a good overall product, with aggressive filtering and a good selection of features. While Optenet's heuristic filtering is prone to some overblocking and it isn't as secure as some competitors, Optenet provides solid parental controls.

**Buy:** <http://www.optenetpc.com>

**Price:** \$39.99

### Manageability

Installation of Optenet was straightforward, but we found the interface not as smooth as some of the best parental controls. We were able to quickly create user profiles and add categories and sites to block or unblock. Optenet has work to do to catch up with competitors in Internet activity reporting, as Optenet only provides a list of URLs that aren't parsed down to domain name.

### Accuracy

Optenet's porn blocking was very accurate at 99%, but like many programs that rely heavily on heuristics, this comes at a price. Optenet blocked 23 percent of the sexual health sites, high enough to likely cause some noticeable interference with normal surfing. Optenet did well with the violent sites, blocking 87 percent.

### Security

Like most parental controls, Optenet blocks proxies one at a time, and Optenet blocked most of the proxies we found, but several proxies we found weren't in Optenet's database. Optenet also failed to block Google cache and translation sites, allowing me to use these sites to access blocked content.

### Features

Optenet has a good set of features, including time management, the ability to block applications such as, Instant Messaging, e-mail and games. Missing are automatic alerts to warn parents of inappropriate activity, and more detailed reporting.