

PG

MAGAZINE

WWW.PCMAG.COM



EDITOR RATING



NOVEMBER 24, 2008

NET NANNY 6.0

By Neil J. Rubenking

ContentWatch acquired Net Nanny back in 2007 and released its first product based on the melded technologies early in 2008. The latest release, Net Nanny 6.0 (\$39.99 direct), polishes up all of the minor rough spots from the initial release and adds significant new features. It's a powerful and flexible parental-control solution that includes unique features not found in any of its competitors.

You'll pay a little more to protect a multi-computer household with Net Nanny, as additional licenses cost \$19.99. Safe Eyes 5.0, Webroot Parental Controls, and CyberPatrol Parental Controls 7.7 include three licenses in the base price. Bsafe Online offers three licenses if you pay an additional \$10. But you'll get top-of-the-line protection from Net Nanny. It's worth the extra money.

User Profiles

Net Nanny can apply the same default configuration for all users if you wish, but in most cases you'll want to establish a profile for each user. Some parental-control utilities associate user profiles strictly with Windows accounts—Webroot is an example. Others, like Safe Eyes, use their own proprietary profiles, completely separate from Windows accounts. Net Nanny lets

you swing either way, as do CyberPatrol and Bsafe.

You can start a new profile by duplicating an existing one or, new in this version, you can start from one of six predefined age-specific profiles. Each predefined profile creates an age-appropriate configuration for Web filtering, time scheduling, activity monitoring, and game management. Naturally, you can tune all of these settings for the individual user.

Powerful Content Blocking

Net Nanny assigns one or more of 31 different categories to every Web site. Its configuration page sensibly defaults to displaying just 11 significant ones, like Gambling, Hate/Violence, and Pornography. Opening up the full list lets you control access to categories like E-mail, Shopping, Personals, and Sports. The program categorizes sites by checking its database but also analyzes the content of Web pages as necessary. A brand-new site won't slip through just because it hasn't been logged, nor will a prurient page in a usually clean site.

Like all decent parental-control systems, Net Nanny does its filtering at the protocol level, so it works in any browser. It also offers an unusual option: It can exempt specific Web-aware applications from its filtering. For example, if filtering the Proxy category interferes with your VPN, you can



Net Nanny 6.0

COMPANY: ContentWatch Inc.
<http://www.contentwatch.com>

Specs: Type: Business, Personal, Professional
OS Compatibility: Windows Vista, Windows XP

Bottomline: Net Nanny does everything a parental control utility should do. It also offers unique features like secure Web-traffic filtering and ESRB-based game control. Balancing privacy and security, it can record IM conversations only if they seem dangerous. E-mail alerts and full remote configuration let you manage wherever you are. Net Nanny remains our Editors' Choice for parental control.

Pros: Real-time content-based Web filtering, even in HTTPS. Can record all IMs and send an alert on problem conversations. ESRB-based game filtering. Interactive reports. E-mail alerts. Full remote management. Internet time scheduler now allows override.

Cons: New social-networking monitor is limited. More expensive than the competition for multi-PC households. Time-scheduler overrides not logged.

Price: \$39.99 Direct
Note: \$19.99 Additional license

just put the VPN on the exceptions list.

While Net Nanny doesn't offer the dozen different blocking styles available from CyberPatrol, it does give you several choices. If a younger child happens upon an inappropriate site, Net Nanny diverts the browser to a page explaining that the site is blocked. You can also have it display a browser error message or divert to any local or Web-based page you choose.

When configuring Net Nanny for an older child, the block dialog is a more appropriate response. By default this dialog lets users request an exception for a blocked page. They can simply request access or they can ask to change the page's category locally. This exception request triggers an e-mail notification to you, the parent, and you can remotely accept or reject the request in real time.

Like CyberPatrol, Net Nanny offers an optional "instant override" feature. If you choose to enable this feature for older children and give them the override password, they can proceed to a blocked site by supplying the password. Of course, the override event is logged, and you can receive an e-mail notification. If you're usually at hand when the kids are on the computer, you could enable override without giving them the password.

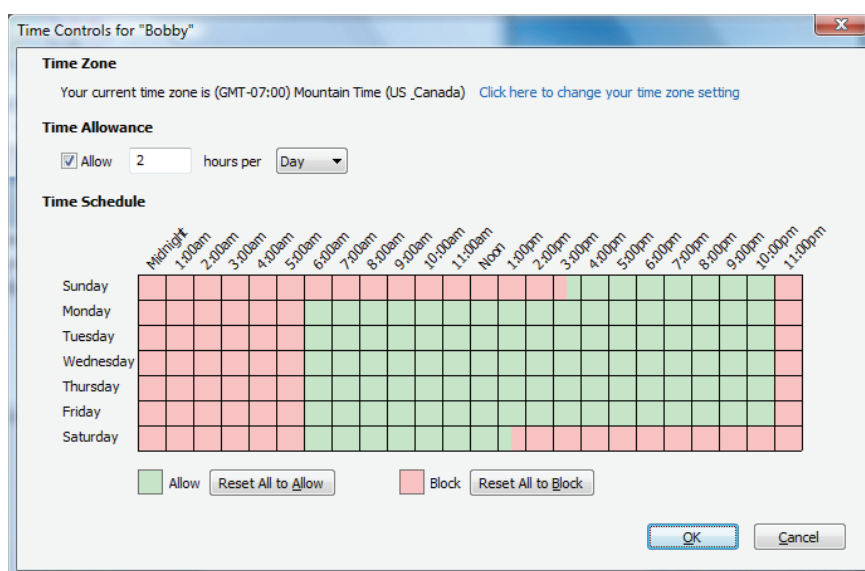
Though it isn't aimed at workplace use as much as CyberPatrol is, Net Nanny can definitely be used to keep employees focused on work-related sites. It even lets you choose, on a category-by-category basis, simply to warn users who stray into an inappropriate category and let them choose to back out or continue, knowing their actions will be logged.

Advanced Blocking

Try this sometime: Prefix a normal nonsecure Web address with `https://` rather than `http://`. It doesn't always work, but in many cases you'll reach the site just as always. And if it's a porn site, this trick will get past almost every parental-control filter, because such filters can't process secure sites. As a sanity check, I verified that this is true of CyberPatrol and Safe Eyes.

Worse, a clever child who manages to route all surfing through a secure proxy site will have unrestricted Internet access. That's why most parental-control products include a category to block access to such proxy sites.

Net Nanny can block proxies, but it has a



second line of defense: It filters both secure and nonsecure traffic. If the Proxy category isn't blocked or if your child manages to find an unblocked proxy, Net Nanny still does its job. And as noted, kids can't fool it by tweaking a Web address to use HTTPS. This is highly unusual: I haven't seen any other product with this level of control.

Here's another nice feature: Net Nanny keeps Google's SafeSearch feature turned on, to keep the kids from coming up with nasty results from a nice search. And it doesn't stop with Google. It enforces a similar feature for AltaVista, AlltheWeb, Dogpile, Lycos, Mamma, MSN, Yahoo, and other search portals based on these.

I did run into a little problem with Net Nanny's blocking and Google's suggested search terms feature. Suppose I want to search for an online pharmacy. As soon as I type "online p" the block dialog appears to say I've been prevented from viewing a Gambling site. The problem is that "online poker" appeared in the list of suggestions. If this becomes a problem you can always click Override or switch to one of the other blocking styles; this problem turns up only when you use the blocking dialog.

Time Control

For each user, you can create a weekly schedule in half-hour increments that defines when Internet access is permitted. As with most parental-control products, Net Nanny has a handy grid that lets you edit the schedule by clicking and dragging with the mouse. The current grid is more attractive and convenient than the split grid found in the last version.

Webroot and CyberPatrol can additionally schedule use of specific programs, and Webroot can schedule overall computer use separately from Internet use. Net Nanny, like Bsafe and Safe Eyes, sticks to scheduling Internet time.

Net Nanny also supports a daily or weekly cap on Internet access. It doesn't go as far as CyberPatrol, which allows a separate cap for each day of the week. The kids can't break out of the schedule by tweaking the system time, because, like Safe Eyes, Net Nanny gets its time from the Internet. Webroot and Bsafe can be fooled by kids who tweak the system clock; CyberPatrol too, to some extent.

Previously, there was no option to override the time schedule other than having a parent open the administrator console and change the underlying schedule. The current version extends the instant-override option to the time-control system. Net Nanny plans to allow overriding the schedule for a specific duration, but at present the override lasts for as long as the browser remains open. The program doesn't log or report time schedule overrides, though you can configure it to send an e-mail alert.

Instant Messaging Management

Net Nanny's IM monitoring is nothing short of phenomenal. It supports AIM/ICQ, Jabber/Google, MSN, MySpace IM, and Yahoo, as well as Tencent QQ, popular in China. At the simplest level, Net Nanny can block access to any of the supported IM protocols. The client programs will still run; they just won't be able to communi-

cate. Bsafe and Safe Eyes offer to block specific IM clients, but, as they don't block at the protocol level, kids can evade them by using third-party clients. Net Nanny also has the ability to block chat, newsgroups, and peer-to-peer file sharing at the protocol level.

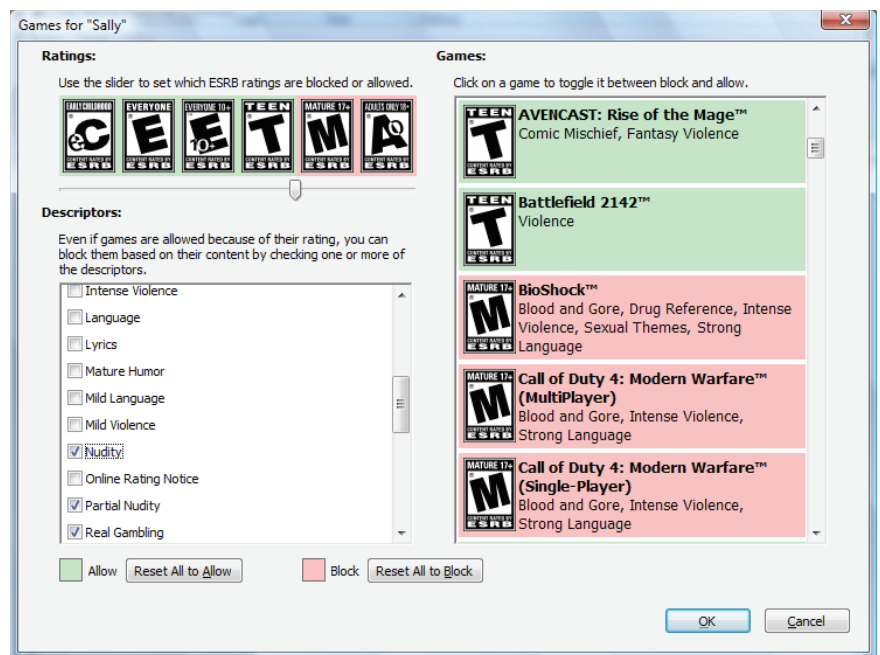
Net Nanny has two distinct styles of IM tracking that can be used separately or together. The IM Recording feature records the entirety of every IM conversation; Bsafe and Safe Eyes can do this as well. But the others have nothing like Net Nanny's IM Monitoring. This feature analyzes each conversation for words and phrases that might indicate a problem. It handles a dozen different categories of questionable language, including threats, sexual language, and profanity, as well as attempts to make real-world contact. IM Monitoring records only the potentially problematic parts of conversations. Even if you feel that recording all conversations would be an invasion of privacy, you'll probably want to use the IM Monitoring feature.

Net Nanny can send an e-mail alert when it detects IM trouble, but it doesn't do so immediately. It waits 5 minutes so as to capture a useful segment of the conversation. And it handles the quirky spelling often used in IM. It's quite different from CyberPatrol's filtering of bad words. CyberPatrol replaces words from a user-defined list with periods in outgoing IM (and other programs). It attempts to do the same for incoming messages, but can do so only for specific supported IM clients.

I tested Net Nanny using AIM, Google Talk, ICQ, MSN, and Yahoo, as well as the IM aggregators Pidgin and Trillian. With IM Recording turned on, Net Nanny captured the entirety of every conversation. I deliberately made up a little drama, trying to simulate a predator pretending to be a classmate. Net Nanny flagged that one for several reasons: asking for personal information, trying to initiate direct contact, and assessing risks by asking "are your parents home?" It also flagged conversations based on other categories like profanity, hurtful language, and sexual language.

Game Management

The game management feature in Net Nanny 5.6 (and CotentProtect before it) was a joke, a simple dialog box that offered to block seven games nobody ever heard of. The current game management feature



is completely different. It relies on Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings: Early Childhood, Everyone, Everyone 10 and Older, Teen, Mature, and Adults Only. A simple slider defines just how far each user can go.

ESRB also identifies about three dozen content categories, and you can independently block games that are tagged with any specific category. For example, some games rated Teen still have "Blood and Gore"—you can block the guts but still allow other Teen-rated games. And you can allow or block status individually for a list of popular games. Games that you install on the computer automatically get added to this list.

This feature is similar to what's in Vista's parental control, but better in some ways. Vista also lets you set a maximum ESRB rating and block specific ESRB content categories, but its list of games resides in a separate window and includes only games currently installed on the computer. And, of course, XP users have no such built-in protection.

Interactive Reports

Most parental-control systems offer an activity log of some sort, but none of the competition approaches the interactivity and flexibility of Net Nanny's reports. For whatever time-period you choose, the Web activity report shows a pie chart of all sites visited by category, a bar chart of the actions taken (allow, block, warn, or over-

ride), a bar chart of activity by user, and a line graph of activity over time.

Clicking within each of the charts drills down for more detail. For example, clicking a category in the pie chart gets a list of users who visited sites in that category, and clicking the user name brings up a list of the actual sites. The other charts function in a similar fashion. It's easy to view all the blocked sites that Timmy tried to visit, or the sites for which Sally invoked override. And, of course, you can print the reports at any level.

A similar set of charts breaks down the result of IM Recording by protocol. If you keep drilling down, you can find out exactly who your child was IMing after midnight and even read both sides of the conversation.

Any IM conversations that trigger an alert are recorded and reported separately. There's no big chart for the IM alerts report, just a list of conversations along with the user, date/time, and categories of questionable content. Opening one of these gets a summary of the conversation identifying the problem phrases along with a short explanation for each category of questionable content involved.

E-Mail Alerts

I've mentioned several times that various actions by the kids can trigger an alert. Configuring an alert takes three simple steps. First, you identify the recipient's e-mail address. Second, you specify

whether this alert is for all users or a specific user. Finally, you define which conditions trigger the alert. You can set an alert for Web sites blocked or warned, or only for sites where the user overrode the block or warning. An exception request can trigger an alert. Finally, you can set the app to alert on IM misbehavior.

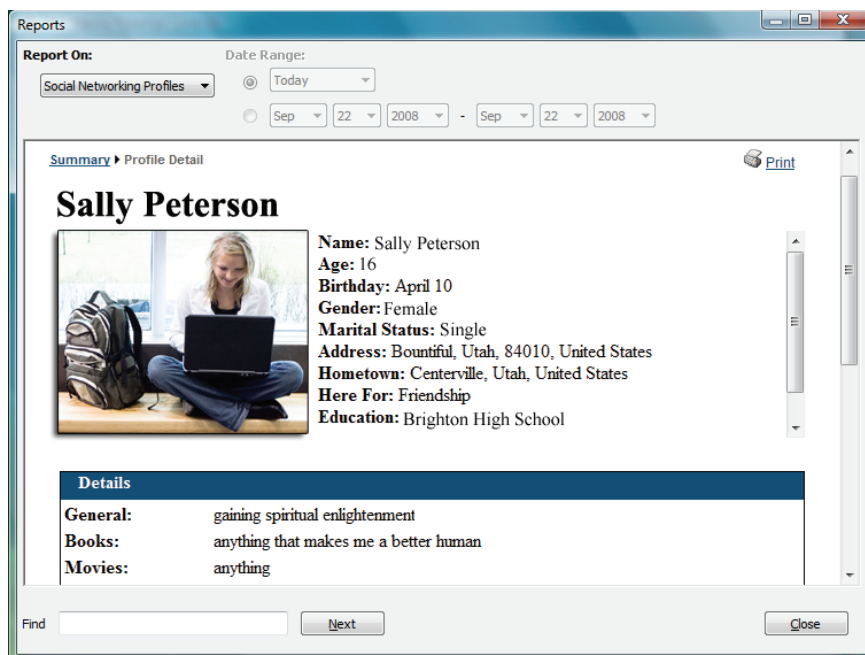
There's no limit to the number of different alerts, so you can make them as granular as you wish. You could set one to alert Mom to IM misbehavior, another to alert Dad to overrides, and yet another to alert both to exception requests. Bsafe and Webroot also offer e-mail alerts; Cyber-Patrol doesn't. Safe Eyes goes all the way, offering notification by e-mail, text message, or telephone. Safe Eyes can also set a threshold—so many "events" within such a time—so as not to alert on every little peccadillo. But Net Nanny's alert system is fine as long as you're accessible via e-mail.

To avoid drowning parents in a sea of little alerts, Net Nanny waits a little while before sending and then gathers together all pending alerts into a single message. Web site alerts include the URL and all relevant action information. IM alerts include the name of the contact, reasons for the alert, and a summary of the problem areas in the conversation. These plain-text alerts can be hard on the eyes; I'd like to see an option to show the IM alerts as HTML mail formatted like the corresponding report. Still, it's a very good notification system.

Complete Remote Management

So what do you do when you get an alert on your work e-mail indicating that Suzie is getting bullied in IM or that Johnnie is using the override password to view naughty pictures? Just log in to Net Nanny's remote management console from any Web-equipped computer. This gives you full access to all features of the local system's configuration.

In previous versions, it could take hours before remote changes would take effect. Now they happen almost immediately, as with remote configuration in Safe Eyes



and Webroot. That means you can put a stop to Suzie's problem by just cutting off IM for her, and you can revoke Johnnie's override rights remotely. You can also review requests for Web-site exceptions and accept or reject them immediately. And the remote console optionally gives full access to the same reports that you can view locally.

Social Networking

New in this version, Net Nanny attempts a degree of social-networking control. This feature clearly has some growing to do, but it's a start. If enabled, it specifically gives parents access to any Facebook profile opened on the home computer. Kids gets a warning that in order to log in, they must install the ContentWatch Facebook application. No application, no log-in. Once installed, the application lets Net Nanny pull information from the child's profile.

With the application in place, Net Nanny can download profile information regardless of where the child chooses to log in and update Facebook. Of course, a child wanting to hide Facebook activity could simply reject (or uninstall) the

application and then never log in from the home computer.

For each registered profile, the Social Networking report lists essential details like name, birthday, gender, and so on. If your kids backdate their birthdays to look older, you'll know it. Drilling down you can see photo albums, friends, and more. The report gets updated just once a day, and there are no alerts or notifications, but Net Nanny plans to beef up this feature going forward.

Net Nanny does everything you'd expect from a parental-control system extremely well. Kids won't be able to get around its content filtering by using an off-brand browser or fake out the time scheduler by changing the system clock. It's uniquely able to filter HTTPS sites, and its IM monitoring outshines the rest by working at the protocol level. It brings Vista-style ESRB-based game management to those not yet using Vista. Finally, Net Nanny's combination of e-mail alerts and full remote management mean you can keep tabs on kids from work or from around the world. Net Nanny remains our Editors' Choice for parental control.

