

Online Safety Guide for Parents of Children and Teens

COVID-19 has been an unexpected and very significant catalyst to broadening our online activities and presence. Parents, teachers, and students have all had to experience a crash course in online learning and work together to create “classrooms” in every home. Screen time is now a must for students and adults who are required to participate in school and work from home and has become a lifeline to keeping family and friends connected.

As distance learning/living becomes the new “normal,” it is imperative to consider how to keep minors safe while they are online. Understanding the risks children face online, such as cyber-bullying, sexting, and pornography, is essential to facilitating dialogue and creating safety plans for your child. This document aims to raise awareness and be a conversation guide for parents seeking

to address these concerns with their kids. According to the Child Online Safety Index, approximately 60% of eight to twelve-year olds are exposed to “cyber risk,” which includes cyber-bullying and online contact by strangers (peers or adults).

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across pornographic media themselves. Having discussions like the ones outlined here is helpful to learning about your child’s risks and to set expectations for online behaviors. Whether or not your child has already engaged in risky behaviors, these conversations are necessary.

Research (and experience) demonstrates that simply saying “don’t do that” is the quickest way to pique a child’s curiosity. So, how can parents encourage appropriate technology use, healthy relationships, and safety? Research also shows that listening and engaging in discussion about sensitive issues is an effective path to a shared understanding of boundaries and expectations, even as they relate to your child’s online behavior.

These guiding principles can help begin a conversation between a parent/guardian and child:

- Ask open-ended questions to keep the conversation going and to avoid closed “yes” or “no” answers.
- Listen without judgment, and hear what your child has to say. You may be surprised by what your child shares. Take in the information and, if necessary, take time to process what your child has told you.
- Set expectations and boundaries for online behavior that align to your family’s values, as well as allowing for curiosity and developmental stages.

Cyberbullying

Most online platforms (SnapChat, TikTok, VSCO, Instagram, etc.) feature built-in commenting, chat, direct messaging, and/or group discussions. Youth often form attachments or make friends with people they “meet” online. Particularly during COVID-19, when IRL (in real life) friendships are not readily available, it is important for parents to understand their child’s need for peer connections and the role they play in their social development.



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These functions are among the riskiest areas for your child to engage in conversations, since random people can easily reach out to your child, which may lead to many negative interactions.

The term cyber-bullying is understood to be peer-to-peer interaction, and reasons for the bullying can vary. The impact is not lessened when bullying occurs online – it can actually further isolate a child (e.g., seeing posts of friends together can make a child feel left out, and because friends exclusively post happy moments, the child feels he/she is the only one with problems).

A 2018 Pew Research Center survey identified that 59% of youth have experienced cyber-bullying, which may include name calling, rumor spreading, constant asking of where they are/what they're doing by a peer, physical threats, receiving unsolicited explicit media, and having explicit images of themselves shared without consent.

Sexting

Another pervasive risk that can be difficult to discuss with your child is “sexting,” defined as sending suggestive photos, videos, or language to another person through texts, apps, etc. Photos/videos can be shared by someone their own age and/or an adult posing as a minor. Parents need to understand the pressure today's youth feel to participate in risky behavior, which may be presented as a normal part of flirting or dating, in order to help their children navigate the risks and avoid the permanent impact.

Youth may not know:

- What happens online stays online (or in someone else's possession) forever. A picture or video cannot be unsent. Even if an app seems to erase the image, it is never safe to share a picture or video of a sexual nature: viewers may save, screen-capture, or record the content, and the data lives forever in “the cloud.”
- Initiating the exchange of explicit images and videos may make the recipient feel pressured to respond with pics or video of their own; thus, normalizing the content and the experience. Not only is this an unhealthy relationship dynamic, but it is also the creation and distribution of child pornography.
- Trust takes time to develop, as does any healthy relationship. Trusting someone too easily can lead to disappointment. In the context of online communication, it can be life altering when someone who was trusted with photos and/or videos breaks that

trust by posting them publicly or sharing them with others.

- Although it may “seem normal” to youth, sending sexually explicit pictures and videos is illegal. Minors sharing or distributing content depicting minors (even themselves) in a sexual manner or just nude is still considered child pornography and could result in police involvement.
- Even if your child did not ask for the photo/video, keeping it on their phone after having received it is also illegal. No one should share these images and an adult needs to be notified immediately.
- Your child's body belongs to them, and **NO ONE** should ever pressure them to compromise their dignity or respect for themselves. It is ok to say “No.”

National Center on Sexual Exploitation Research
Summary:

A survey of 4,564 adolescents ages 14–17 found that viewing internet pornography is significantly associated with an increased probability of having sent sexual images and messages (sexting) among boys.

A survey of 617 college freshman found that 30% of participants sent nude pictures at some time during high school; 45% had received nude pictures on their cell phones.

The most important motivation for sexting (about 50%) was coercion such as blackmail or threats.

Pornography

Pornography is defined as still or moving pictures of sexual acts. Pornography has become increasingly acceptable, accessible, and freely available. With unfettered access to the internet, children are clicking on links to pornography accidentally and purposely. If parents and other responsible adults don't educate children about sex, the internet will. The most common way this happens is through pornography.

Pornography paints an unrealistic picture of sexuality and relationships that can create an expectation for real-life experiences that will never be fulfilled. To be frank, pornography shows us a world where relationships mean nothing and immediate sexual gratification means everything.

Common Sense Media states:

- 70% of children ages 7-18 have accidentally encountered online pornography, often through a web search while doing homework.



- 93% of boys are exposed to internet porn before the age of consent (18).
- 26% of adolescents ages 13-17 actively seek out porn weekly or more often.

You may be surprised, disappointed or even angry when asking questions and hearing about your child's experience with pornography. Many families have values that would not allow pornography in their homes. Setting expectations for your child is important; as is understanding their exposure.

Adult Predators

It is virtually impossible for anyone to meet someone online and know if they are an adult or child, male or female. Adults who perpetrate crimes against children may use apps, games, and social media platforms to chat with minors and to entice them to send images and/or videos and meet in person. Online services are required to conduct age verification (to qualify as a child or adult), but these barriers are easily manipulated by predators.

Many predators begin “grooming” (a process in which adults meet the needs of children in order to build trust and gain access to information to develop an intimate relationship) by messaging children, sending virtual “gifts,” “poking” them, and sharing photos or links of inappropriate sites to visit. The grooming process can take days, weeks, or months; it is important for parents to educate their children about this danger and establish clear expectations about online interactions.

According to GuardChild:

- 69% of teens regularly receive online communication from strangers and don't tell a parent or caretaker.

According to the Pew Research Center:

- 95% of all teens ages 13-17 own a smartphone, providing full internet access.
- Most teens (84%) – especially boys (92%) – have internet-ready game consoles.
- Ninety percent of teens ages 13-17 use internet-connected social media apps.

Ready to start a conversation?

A Conversation Guide: How to Talk to Children about Sex, Sexting and Digital Safety