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KNOW! to Promote Safe Internet Habits

The internet can be a great tool for young people. It can provide a way to keep in touch with friends, relax, do schoolwork, find support for mental health problems, and express themselves. Because young people are online so much of the time, they need to know how to use the internet safely, behave respectfully online, and avoid risks.¹

The following is a list of the main risks that young people face online. While these risks may seem scary, the reality is that most young people will be fine. A helpful analogy from the [MediaSmarts Digital Citizenship Guide](#) is to "think of the internet as being like a swimming pool: the best way to keep your kids safe there is to teach them how to stay safe."²

- Exposure to upsetting content, including pornography, violence, hate sites, fake news, and sites about drug use, self-harm, suicide, or negative body image.
- Contact with adults posing as children online and scammers.
- Participating in or being the victim of cyberbullying, sexting, impersonating other people online, and problematic internet use.
- Exposure to inappropriate marketing and personal data collection.¹

These risk factors can have a negative impact on young people's mental health wellness, so it's important to take the time to talk about safe internet usage before problems occur.

How You Can Help

Use these tips to help guide your conversations about safe internet habits.

Start Talking Sooner

Communication about internet safety is key when it comes to preparing your young person for the problems they may face online. It's never too early (or too late) to start providing guidance on how to avoid problems online and what to do if problems occur. By having these conversations, you'll be preparing your young person to deal with online issues and paving the way for them to reach out to you if they need help.^{2,3}

Stay in the Know

Ask your young person to allow you, or another trusted adult, to follow them on their social networks. This allows you to stay connected and build trust with them, while also keeping an eye out for any safety concerns. Young people's online interests are often just as important to them as their "real life" interests. Younger children especially tend to get excited when their caregivers show an interest in the things they like. Ask them to show you what they like to watch, read, and play online. Stay connected with your young person, and check in from time to time, but remember to give them space online just like you would in real life.^{1,2,3,4}

Be a Role Model

Adults' behavior has a major impact on the behavior and values of young people, so it is important to be a positive role model for safe and healthy internet use. Use digital media the way you would like your young person to use it. Stay positive and respectful online, and set boundaries for when you use your phone or device. You might avoid using a device during meals or maintain a phone-free hour before bed. Find what works for you and do your best to model good behavior.¹

Establish Rules

Work with your young person to create online safety resolutions that reflect your values. Talk through which privacy settings they should use, what's appropriate to post, how much time to spend online, how you plan to interact with them online, and the type of behavior you expect from them online. Be sure to emphasize that they should never share personal information (name, address, phone number, school, email, job, etc.) with anyone online and they should always come to you or another trusted adult if they experience any problems or feel uncomfortable with an interaction online.^{1,2,3,4}

Talk Openly

Encourage your young person to talk with you about what they like and don't like online. You can ask them questions about the apps they use or commend them when they engage in respectful online behavior. By talking openly about both good and bad things online, they will be more likely to come to you for help if they have a bad experience online. Many young people are afraid they'll get in trouble if they talk to adults when something goes wrong online. Remember that your response will impact whether they come to you for help the next time they experience a problem - so avoid blame and punishment as your first response.^{1,2,4}

Build Resilience

You can't protect your young person from ever experiencing something unpleasant on the internet, but you can teach them the skills to deal with problems when they occur. Remind them that while they can't always control what happens to them, they can control how they react. Acknowledge that some problems may seem big right now and that's okay, but remind them that with time, problems that seem big will get smaller and smaller. Emphasize the importance of taking breaks from being online and practicing self-care.²

Emphasize Respect

Communicating via the internet can be depersonalizing and often results in rude or disrespectful behavior, including cyberbullying. Talk with your young person about the importance of being respectful and polite to others online. You can start the conversation by asking "What would you do if someone posted something online that made you angry, scared, or sad?" or "What would you do if somebody asked you for a photo that you didn't want to send, or asked you to share a photo that somebody else sent you?" Remind them that bullying and harassment of any kind are not okay, and remind them to come to you right away if someone is being mean to them online so that you can work out a solution together. You might provide your young person with a few responses to bullying online like "that's not how we do things here" or "stuff like that ruins the game for everyone." Make sure that both you and your young person know the [warning signs of cyberbullying](#) and have a plan for what to do if you see or experience it.^{2,5,6}

Know When to Log Off

While the internet is an important tool for communication and creativity, being online for excessive amounts of time is neither safe nor healthy. Excessive internet use can have negative impacts on school and sleep, so work with your young person to set boundaries for time spent online. Remind them to check their mood before they post as people don't always make good decisions while they're stressed. If they're feeling upset or angry, it might be time to step away from the screen and cool down, rather than venting online.^{5,7}

Resources:

Digital Citizenship Guide
Cyberbullying Prevention
Internet Matters
Cyber Safety Resources for Schools

Sources:

1. Internet safety for teenagers | Raising Children Network
2. Digital Citizenship Guide for Parents (mediasmarts.ca)
3. How to Keep Your Teen (or Tween) Safe Online | SafeWise
4. Internet Safety Tips for Parents of Teens | Planned Parenthood of Northern New England
5. How To Stay Safe Online: 10 Tips for Teens - Digital Detox - Time to Log Off (itstimetologoff.com)
6. Online Safety Tips for Teens | NCDIT
7. Online Safety (for Teens) - Nemours KidsHealth

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