Talking to Children About
Online Safety

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Children and youth live in a globally connected world and most interact daily with the Internet. Using the Internet, young people can learn new things, interact with peers and face dangers and concerns. Parents and other adults can help children to learn and interact safely online, monitor their Internet usage, set limits and discuss any potential issues or concerns that come up related to online safety.

The Online World and Children's Safety

Today's world functions as a global village, an interconnected community due to the Internet, and the online world has come to stay. With the Internet, the possibilities seem unlimited for young people to expand their knowledge, communicate and interact with peers, meet new people, and keep up with current issues and events happening in the world. However, children and youth can also be exposed to dangers as they hit the road of exploring the information highway.

As a parent, relative or other caring adult in a child's life, you face the task of helping children to learn about and navigate the world safely. By knowing the dangers and how to avoid them, young people can experience the positive aspects of the Internet while avoiding most of its pitfalls. It is important to understand and promote safe online practices among young people of all ages.

What is Online Safety?

First, Internet usage generally refers to the access and interactions that people have with online spaces, also referred to as "cyberspace" or the "digital world", through a computer or other digital device. Access and interactions can occur using webpages on the Internet, online chat rooms, blog spaces, online gaming spaces or apps, or video or music sharing platforms such as YouTube, TikTok or Spotify. There are many ways to interact with the world online and much of it targets young people.

Online Safety or **Internet Safety**, in simple terms, *refers to making sure that children and others are protected and safe while being engaged online*. More specifically, it refers to developing awareness of potential threats you might encounter while engaging in online activity and taking steps to avoid or minimize harm. Being safe includes developing awareness of security threats such as computer viruses, protecting and managing your personal data online, and avoiding harmful or illegal content. Online safety further includes implementing security policies, adopting thoughtful practices, and maintaining consistent processes to minimize online safety threats and prevent harm from online experiences. For parents and other adults, this also means being aware of and thoughtful about how children and youth are supported and monitored in their online experiences.

By being aware of online dangers and how to avoid them, children and the adults who care for them can take advantage of the positive aspects of the Internet while avoiding harm and maintaining safety.

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Talking to Young Children (ages 4 to 8)

When talking to young children from ages 4 to 8, consider the following:

What to Say and Do

- Limit screen time and online interactions of younger children. When allowing them to use digital devices, partner and spend time with them in interactive ways rather than leaving them alone. This practice helps young children learn to talk with adults about online interactions.

Understanding Online Safety Concerns

Children are not automatically aware of the risks that exist online. They gain an understanding of online safety through what they see, learn and experience. A leading educator on online safety stated: "Parents and educators play a prominent role in teaching children how to safely navigate the online world. By monitoring usage, fostering open communication, and promoting responsible behavior, they can help children build resilience and awareness needed to thrive in the digital age."

So, what is it that parents and other adults should be aware of and proactive about in ensuring online safety for children and youth? The most common concerns include:

- **Cyberbullying or online harassment** – Children can be harmed emotionally due to cyberbullying or other types of online harassment. This occurs when technology tools or platforms are used to threaten, intimidate or embarrass another person. This may happen via rude or threatening text messages, chat posts, or social media messages or posts, with the intent to hurt, exclude or embarrass someone.

- **Exposure to inappropriate content** – Varieties of inappropriate content for kids can include images, videos or text that is sexually explicit, false or deceptive, violent or hateful toward others. Again, such content can be damaging to a child's emotional and mental well-being.

- **Manipulation or exploitation** – Young people may encounter others online who seek to gain their trust and then exploit or hurt them. Such efforts are often called "grooming," and predatory individuals may get private information from a child and then blackmail them, share illegal or harmful content, or seek to meet them and cause them harm.

- **Security threats** – Practices such as "phishing" (efforts to gather your private information), running scams, or installing malware on a device that interferes with its functioning are common threats. Such practices are typically fraudulent and can trick youth or adults into sharing private information or may lead to someone stealing identity, personal data or money.

- **Misuse of private information or data** – Another online concern occurs when private information is shared or obtained by fraud, and images, personal details or other data gets used in harmful or illegal ways.

- **Screen time and limits** – Though the online world is fascinating, research suggests too much screen time or too many digital interactions can result in greater anxiety and depression, lower social skills and reduced overall well-being for children.

Parents and other adults exert a powerful influence on how children engage with online experiences. Online safety concerns will vary with ages of children, with screen time being a concern for younger children while older kids are more likely to be targeted with cyberbullying or security threats. Adults need to monitor children's online usage and foster open communication with them about their online interactions.

- Introduce younger children to kid-friendly search engines and directories. Guide them to make their online usage purposeful rather than random.

- Explain to young children that most online interactions should be similar to interactions in person. Encourage them to be respectful, avoid mean or rude language toward others, and not bully or threaten others.

- Ask young children to turn off their screen or digital device right away and seek out a trusted adult if anything occurs that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, confused or vulnerable.

- Encourage children to report right away if someone online asks the child's name, address, telephone number, or name and location of school. Direct children not to share such information online and not to keep secrets about online interactions.

- Ask children to tell a trusted adult if anyone online asks to chat privately or especially if they want to meet in person.

- When younger children are allowed to use digital devices, monitor their activities and talk with them regularly about their interactions so they become comfortable discussing online usage and experiences.

Talking to Adolescents (ages 9 to 13)

When talking to adolescent children from ages 9 to 13, consider the following:

What to Say and Do

- Respond to questions that children may have about going online or online experiences. Allow them to be curious and use their interest to open up communication about online safety and interactions. Conversation allows you to assess what children understand, any questions they might have, and what interests them about the online world.

- Guide children to be cautious and thoughtful about online content and interactions. Encourage them to avoid or turn off content that is rude or

disrespectful, threatening, violent or sexually inappropriate. Use parental controls or filtering programs to limit access to objectionable content.

- Set up clear rules for online activities and interactions. These rules should include when a child can be online, for how long they can be online, who the child may or may not communicate with online and appropriate sites or activities for the child to engage with online.

- Help your child to learn digital literacy and citizenship knowledge and skills. Library programs, schools and online safety organizations can assist with resources. For example, help a child learn how to evaluate a website or ways to assess and trust information shared online.

- Ask children to tell a trusted adult if they are online and come across anything that makes them feel frightened, unsafe, confused or uncomfortable. Again, encourage discussion of such issues in a natural, open manner.

- Counsel children to avoid sharing personal information with people online, such as address, telephone number, parents' or guardian's work information or phone number, financial information or name and location of school. Also, to avoid sharing personal images or other information online.

- Monitor a child's online interactions and ask them to tell you about any person that approaches them online. Explain that they should never meet or plan to meet in person with anyone they have met online without adult awareness and approval first.

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Talking to Teens (ages 14 to 18)

When talking to teens from ages 14 to 18, consider the following:

What to Say and Do

- Engage with and explore the interests of teenagers related to online safety and interactions. They live in an online world. Their education, their jobs, and much of their future will involve online interactions. Talk to them about setting healthy boundaries for their amount of time online, as well as their online activities.

- Discuss rules for online activities and interactions. Collaborate on setting clear rules, as teens are much more likely to follow rules they have been allowed to help create. Also, discuss strategies for keeping the rules and consequences if they are not followed.

- Set guidelines for when the teen may be online, how much time they can spend daily online, who they may or may not interact with online, and sites or activities that may be engaged with online. Encourage and support activities outside of online engagement.

- Encourage teens to avoid downloading or opening any material or files from anyone they do not know without specific permission. In addition to offensive content, spam or junk email may contain viruses or other online threats that can damage a computer or other digital device.

- Emphasize the importance of being cautious and minimizing how personal information is shared online. These practices can include not sharing identifying personal information such as a full name or phone number, not sharing personal information of friends or family, and not sending or receiving images that should be private. Also, youth should avoid exchanging private information with anyone they do not know or meeting up in person with someone they met online without adult awareness and permission.

Internet Crimes and Children

Here are a few key points to understand about Internet crimes and children:

- Internet crimes are the fastest growing type of crime in the United States and children are the fastest growing group of victims. ("Protecting Children Online," San Diego County District Attorney Office, 2025)

- Skilled criminals may use the Internet to find out a person's identity, where they live and even how to access their computer or digital device. ("2024 Internet Crime Report," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025)

- The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) became U.S. law in 2000 and is designed to protect online privacy of children under the age of 13. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) monitors and enforces this law. It has guidelines to assess if the content or advertising of a commercial website is being targeted to children under age 13. ("Kids' Privacy (COPPA)," Federal Trade Commission, 2025)

- Between 60% and 80% of youth ages 9-18 report exposure to harmful content online, including violence, cyberbullying and sexual content. ("What Being Online Was Like for Kids in 2023," BARK Annual Report, 2024)

- Reports made to the CyberTipline, which tracks exploitation of children online, passed 36.2 million in 2023 and have shown continued increases. ("2024 CyberTipline Report," National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2024)

- In 2024, victims younger than 20 years of age reported financial losses of over $22 million. ("2024 Internet Crime Report," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025)

Helping Children with Online Mistakes or Concerns

Providing children with support as a parent or adult is important, especially when a young person makes mistakes in their online involvement or experiences concerns. In such situations, parents and other adults can:

- Remain calm and listen to the child. Be patient, supportive and encouraging.

- While you may not have an immediate answer or help, reassure the child that you will help them get needed resources and correct any mistakes. Also, clearly document any concerns from online interactions, such as unwanted contacts.

- Take the opportunity to review and set up any available parental control of electronic devices and access to them.

- Reach out to trusted sources to take steps to minimize harm, overcome mistakes, and access needed resources for any specific online safety concerns.

Conclusion

The consequences of how children learn about and manage their interactions in the online world are important for their life, happiness and future. Healthy online practices help them assess threats and concerns, avoid unwise activities or interactions and make wise use of their time spent online. However, challenges in navigating the online world can lead to harm, embarrassment or negative effects. Parents and other adults have a significant responsibility to learn about the online world, prioritize online safety and talk with children about the issues involved in living in a digital world.

Recommended Resources

Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab – A nonprofit research center focused on understanding and promoting positive and healthy digital media experiences for young people, with research, resources, conversations and tools for families.
https://digitalwellnesslab.org/

Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health, American Academy of Pediatrics – A source for evidence-based education, resources and tools to support mental health of children and teens in the social media world.
https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/center-of-excellence-on-social-media-and-youth-mental-health/

Common Sense Media – A nonprofit organization giving kids, families and schools a variety of tools and resources to make thoughtful choices about media and technology. Reviews of media content, curricula, media planners and other resources.
https://www.commonsensemedia.org/

ConnectSafely – A nonprofit group that provides education and resources about online safety, privacy and security, with safety tips, parent guides, blogs, podcasts and more.
https://connectsafely.org/

Harvard Center for Digital Thriving – A university-driven resource addressing trends affecting youth and families in technology and with fact sheets, videos and other tools for learning and discussion. *https://digitalthriving.gse.harvard.edu/*

Internet Keep Safe Coalition (iKeepSafe) – Leading organization that helps organizations keep personal information safe, including resources for parents and educators.
https://ikeepsafe.org/resources/family/

Net Cetera – Chatting with Kids About Being Online – Resource guide for parents and adults by the Federal Trade Commission on talking to children about online safety.
https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/net-cetera-chatting-kids-about-being-online

NetSmartz Online Safety Education Program, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children – An online safety education program providing age-appropriate videos and activities to help teach children how to be safer online.
https://www.missingkids.org/NetSmartz/home

Safe Teens Online – A nonprofit organization providing resources and teen peer to peer learning opportunities to promote online safety and secure practices among teens, families, schools and communities. *https://safeteensonline.org/*

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