

FS2294 (April 2026)



# Protecting Children Online:

## Tips for Parents and Other Adults

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Children and youth live in a world full of digital devices and interactions. Most interact daily online with different devices. Using the Internet, young people can learn new things and interact with peers, but they also face dangers and concerns. Parents and other adults can assist children to learn and interact safely online, monitor their Internet usage, set limits and discuss concerns related to online safety.

## Key Findings on Youth, Parents and Online Activities

- While 75% to 80% of parents indicate concerns about the impact of online involvement for kids, at the same time 75% of them also envision its potential to assist youth with learning and connection. Their concerns focus on excessive time on screens, impacts on attention and mental health, and how much violent and sexual content exists.
- Access to screens is increasing at younger ages for children. By age 4, nearly 6 in 10 children (58%) have their own tablet, while almost a quarter of kids have their own cellphone by age 8. Half (51%) of children age 8 and younger have their own mobile device.
- Children ages 8 and younger spend on average about two and a half hours each day (2024) on screens, with 60% of that time on TV or video viewing and a quarter (26%) on gaming activities.
- One-third of teens use a certain online platform “almost constantly,” with teens aged 13 to 17 visiting the following platforms at least once daily: YouTube (73%); TikTok (57%); Instagram (50%); Snapchat (48%); Facebook (20%). Usage of certain platforms varies by age, race and ethnicity, gender and other factors. The number of US teens who say they are online “almost constantly” has increased from 24% in 2014 to 46% in 2024.
- An online monitoring system (Bark) that reports potential online concerns, reported in 2023 on youth ages 10 to 18 and the percentage of young people that encountered the following content online:
  - Violent subject matter or thoughts (68-82%)
  - Cyberbullying as bully, victim or witness (67-76%)
  - Conversations on drugs or alcohol (58-77%)
  - Nudity or content of a sexual nature (58-75%)
  - Self-harm or suicide content (33-57%)
  - Content about anxiety or depression (19-38%)
  - Predatory behavior from someone online (8-10%).
- In 2023 in an international study, 59% of teens who were ages 13 to 17 were likely to seek help from adults after experiencing an online risk. Also, 50% of parents were uncertain about best ways to monitor children’s online activities, and 43% of parents indicated they did not trust their child to act responsibly online.

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# ACTIVITY – Taming Tech Together

In addressing technology use with kids, the goal should not be to avoid using technology at all. Instead, the goal should be for parents and youth to work together in “taming technology” and using it wisely. Use the following steps to try a “tech-taming experiment” together:

## STEP 1: MAKE A PLAN – Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is our goal? (Example: “I want to feel more rested at night” or “I want to do more outside activities.”)
- Write Goal: \_\_\_\_\_
- How will it feel if we are successful?
- What small tech habit will we change to reach this goal?
  - Write Habit: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Example: “Turn off technology use by 8 pm during weeknights” OR “Delete an app that is taking too much time each day.”

## STEP 2: DO THE CHALLENGE – Focus on one week and try to do your tech habit challenge each day. You can do it!

- Put a check mark for each day you do the self-challenge.
  - Monday
  - Tuesday
  - Wednesday
  - Thur
  - Friday
  - Saturday
  - Sunday

## STEP 3 – REFLECT ON YOUR EFFORTS – Do a self-evaluation with your child. Talk about how your efforts went together. Ask yourselves the following questions:

- What did we notice during this challenge? What felt good? What didn’t work?
- How hard was this to do on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high)?
  - Level of Difficulty (circle one):    1    2    3    4    5
- What were obstacles in effectively doing our challenge?
  - List Obstacles: \_\_\_\_\_
- Do we want to continue this new effort or habit? If yes, how can we be more successful?

## TAMING TECH TIPS

- Doing such an activity together can visibly show your child how to tame the influence of technology in their lives.
- Also, working together helps each family member to both lend and receive support.
- Plan specific steps to continue or sustain a habit or goal in managing technology use.
- Brainstorm how to support each other in these efforts.

(Note: Idea adapted from concept in *It’s Their World: Teens, Screens, and the Science of Adolescence* by Erin Walsh, 2025, pp. 45-46)

# Recommendations for Parents and Caregivers About Online Activity

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- **Talk through and set up guidelines and rules for online activity in your home.** Help children understand why these rules are important. Post the online rules near any family computer or area of the household where children use devices to go online and discuss them regularly with children.
- **Keep open spaces for children and youth to engage online and have some monitoring.** Computers, tablets and other devices should be set up or made available in common spaces where online usage can be seen and monitored by adults and others as needed.
- **Become familiar with what your child likes to do online and have frequent, informal conversations with kids about what they are accessing and doing in their online activities.** Online activities might include interactive games, watching videos or other activities. Helping kids share and engage in a comfortable way is important.
- **Familiarize yourself with online activities and programs.** Learn about the programs, apps, games and websites your children visit or use. If needed, take a class or ask someone to assist you. Keep track of any online accounts that your child uses to access programs and be certain you can check who is interacting with them and what kind of messages they are receiving or sending.
- **Explain to your child that instant messaging should be used only with real-life friends.** Using instant messaging or chat features can be fun, but children should chat only with school or family friends they know off-line and face-to-face.
- **Become aware of who interacts with your child online.** Spend time with your child on the device they use to go online. Have your child explain the real-life identities of each person in their friend list or profile and how they interact. Address any questions or concerns and explain good online etiquette, including avoiding insults, bullying and similar behavior.
- **Explain to children about online safety and that individuals online are not always honest about who they are or what they want.** Help children recognize what their personal information is (name, address, phone numbers, email or other identifying information) and that it can be risky to give out such information online, whether about themselves or family members. Also, inform them that websites or programs for children are not permitted to request personal information without permission from a parent or guardian, and they should avoid sharing such information.
- **Ask your child to share with and show you their profile or information on any social networking site, if they are on such sites.** Talk about privacy settings with them and have them set their page to “private” for any app, game or device that they are using. Search your child’s name and see what information can be seen. Talk to your child about only allowing people they know and trust in real life to access their page. Inform your child about their right to delete any information they would like to be kept from public view.
- **Ensure that children understand and use a strong password.** Help children understand the value of a strong password and how to create one as well, along with advising them never to share passwords with anyone (other than a parent or guardian as needed).
- **Talk with children about posting photos online.** While photos are popular, most photos contain information that can reveal much of a child’s identity, such as where children attend school, who they are friends with, what teams or clubs they are involved in or where they live. Encourage children to think carefully before posting information or photos online, and also ensure that filters and blocking software are turned on and active.
- **Help children understand that items posted online often become public information.** When information is posted or shared on a social networking site, even within a private profile setting, it can still become public information. Discuss with children the possible consequences of posting inappropriate or provocative information online (such as review by future employers or fraudulent use of information).
- **Encourage an open, trusting relationship with your child.** Children may do or see things online that they shouldn’t, but then don’t want to tell parents or guardians because of fear that they will lose online privileges. This often happens even if they don’t do something that is a concern. Encourage your children to be open and share with a trusted adult if they see something that makes them feel uncomfortable, scared or confused in their online activity. Also, show them how to turn off a screen or monitor, and emphasize it’s not their fault if they see something upsetting that was online.
- **Talk to children about not responding to e-mail, chat or other communications online that are offensive, bullying or dangerous.** Report any such communications to law enforcement or other appropriate adults. Also, you can report such interactions to the Cyber Tipline, which is set up to handle reports on missing or exploited children (including online), at <https://report.cybertip.org/> or 1.800.843.5678.
- **Be attentive and track the sites that children are accessing online.** Regular review should occur and children should be aware this will happen. You can review activity by looking in the history section on the browser they use.
- **Take time to do a “digital disconnect” on a regular basis and help children become intentional and thoughtful about their online time and activities.** Any activity that is overdone can become harmful. Children need a wide variety of interactions, especially social time with friends and family, time in creative activities, and time spent outdoors or in other settings without online interference.

## Understanding Protective Software and Online Activities

To help individuals have a safer online experience, there are a variety of tools and software resources that have been developed. Protective software typically offers six types of actions: suggest, search, monitor, inform, warn or block. These actions are designed to assist with protecting children online. They may monitor communications, suggest preferred websites for children, or block access to certain types of content online.

**Blocking and filtering tools** for use online have a large range of customization options, including:

- The ability to allow approved sites (allow lists) and block unapproved sites (deny lists)
- The targeting of key words and/or phrases to trigger actions
- The designation of whole categories of content to allow or block
- The choice of whether inappropriate content should trigger a block, a warning message, a log entry, or other actions
- The capacity to make different configurations for different children in your household

“Censorware” is a term used to describe software that filters out undesirable websites or online content. Examples of such software programs are numerous. Such software is designed to restrict an individual’s ability to send or receive certain types of information, often blocking certain website categories or using language-based criteria to filter out content. Parents and other adults must consider their own views about using such tools and how to help their children navigate the online world safely.

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## Practical Resources for Online Safety

- **Boston Children’s Digital Wellness Lab** – A nonprofit research center focused on understanding and promoting positive and healthy digital media experience for young people, with research, resources, conversations and tools for families. <https://digitalwellnesslab.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/>
- **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>
- **Online Health and Safety for Children and Youth Resources – SAMHSA Resource Page** – This resource page includes a variety of tip sheets, conversation starters, and other resources for families.
  - <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/children-and-families/online-health-and-safety-for-children-and-youth>
- **Safe Surfin’ Foundation** – A nonprofit founded by law enforcement focused on providing education about cyber safety and responsibility for youth and adults, including videos, parent guidebook on kids and technology, reporting tools and more. <https://safesurfin.org/>

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