

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP KEEP THEIR TEENS SAFE ONLINE?

It's no surprise that adolescents are drawn to the Internet and new technologies — it allows them to quickly connect and communicate with friends, search topics they would otherwise be too embarrassed to discuss with others, and experiment with intimacy. While these are all healthy adolescent behaviours, using technology for these purposes does present some risks. For example, an adolescent's behaviour is less inhibited when they use technology, and they are not developmentally ready to handle the complex situations that can arise on the Internet. Adolescents may say and do things online that they may not have otherwise done if they were face-to-face with a person.

Monitoring your adolescent's online activity can become more difficult as a teen's need for greater independence from their parents only increases as they age. The most common areas where you can find adolescents attempting to expand their social world are through portable devices (iPads, mobile phones, etc.). It is not a simple process for parents to constantly monitor, stay involved with and supervise their adolescent while still balancing a teen's wish for independence. Typically, teens are highly skeptical and resistant to parental involvement. The following strategies are designed to assist parents in communicating with children ages 12 to 15 about online activities.

Important regular discussions to have with your teen:

Online behaviour

- Reinforce the public nature of the Internet and explain to your adolescent how easily information shared can be misused by others (i.e. sending private information to someone it was not intended for).
- Explain to your adolescent that once a picture is sent online, s/he loses control of what is done with it. Pictures may never be completely removed from the Internet.
- Discuss with your adolescent the concept of respect and how it can be preserved or destroyed by messages sent online, even if s/he may be joking or saying something for fun. What might seem like fun at the start, including sexual conversations or interactions, can quickly escalate and become a problem.
- Teach your adolescent that it is illegal for people to create, possess or distribute naked or sexually explicit pictures of children under 18 years of age.
- Discuss the risks of online activities such as having sexually explicit conversations or sharing sexually explicit material with people online.

Although adolescents can appear as though they can handle things, they require and unconsciously seek adult guidance and supervision.

Contact with others

- Emphasize the importance of boundaries between children and adults online and offline.
- Explain that it is illegal to threaten someone online or offline. Explain that threats are control techniques to try to gain compliance by a child. If someone threatens her/him, s/he needs to tell a safe adult.
- Explain that there is no need or urgency to respond to any messages. Teach her/him not to respond to messages that make her/him feel uncomfortable.
- Discuss with your adolescent the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Discuss the risks involved with meeting someone in person who s/he first met online without adult supervision.
- Use real life stories from the media to discuss situations that have happened with young people. Then create 'what if' scenarios together to generate options for getting out of or avoiding difficult or serious situations. Include scenarios where flattery is used to mislead a child. This is especially important with young girls as pressure in society to "fit in" through physical attractiveness is entrenched in mass media. As seen in Cybertip.ca reports, flattery is a common control technique used by adults attempting to gain sexual access to children.
- Teach your adolescent how to get out of unwanted conversations and/or relationships. Explain the importance of seeking adult help without fearing getting into trouble.
- Encourage open communication and be conscious of your adolescent's sensitivity to social judgment. S/he may be hesitant to share her/his personal experiences.

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How do I know if I need to be concerned?

As a parent, you know your adolescent better than anyone else. If you have a gut feeling that something is not right, and you've noticed changes in your adolescent's behaviour, trust your instincts. It certainly doesn't mean you should jump to the worst conclusion as there are many reasons why your adolescent could be acting differently.

Listed below are some indicators to help you know when you should intervene. Please note that the list is not exhaustive. Also note that any online communication that is sexual between an adult and a child is illegal. It is important to pay attention to any behaviours that become frequent and interfere with your adolescent's life, as they may signal your child is experiencing distress.

Your adolescent is acting very differently: Does s/he seem more withdrawn or sad, anxious, defensive, aggressive, angry, or secretive? Is your adolescent overly secretive when online or on the phone?

Your adolescent's time spent online or using technology has significantly increased: Have you noticed a significant increase in how often and how long your adolescent is online?

Your adolescent does not respond to limits: Does your adolescent seem consumed with going online? Does s/he seem preoccupied? Has s/he responded to limits placed on how often and how long s/he is allowed to be online? Does s/he seem desperate or panicked by limits being placed on her/his behaviour?

Online activities are interfering with your adolescent's life: Has your adolescent lost interest in her/his regular activities? Does her/his desire to go online interfere with other responsibilities and interests?

Your adolescent is receiving gifts: Has your adolescent received gifts such as money, a webcam, a digital camera, a cell phone, etc.?

Steps to take when there is reason for concern

If you feel you have reason to be concerned, there are many ways you can step in and help your adolescent.

Consider the following steps:

Step 1: Increase your involvement. Be emotionally and physically available and connected with your adolescent. S/he will likely resist your involvement, but do not back down. It is her/his job to test limits and your job to set them.

Step 2: Increase direct supervision and directly monitor online activities and phone calls. Check chat log histories on social networking sites and Instant Messaging (IM) accounts. Examine text messaging history on her/his cell phone.

Step 3: Speak to your child's best friend's parents to share your concerns and inquire about any information they may have or can help attain.

Step 4: Enforce limits on Internet and cell phone use. Depending on the level of risk to your child, you may consider taking away online access and cell phone use for a limited time.

Step 5: Build your relationship with your adolescent. This will be difficult as s/he is likely to resist. Do not be discouraged — just continue creating opportunities. Even if your adolescent is resistant, s/he will feel how much you care, which is a powerful protective factor.

Information about adolescent victimization

Children are easily manipulated because, developmentally, they are not at the same level as adults as far as cognition, emotions, etc. It is important not to hold children to the same standards of behaviour as adults. Nor to place blame on a young person if they engage in behaviour, that when considering their level of development, is actually quite understandable, though may not fit our preconceived stereotype of childhood innocence. Children are curious and impulsive, and do not have the capacity to realize the full scope of what they are getting into when dealing with an adult who is manipulating them. In situations where threats are not used, children who are groomed online are more likely to voluntarily continue to spend time engaging with the offender.



A child who has been targeted by a sexual offender will typically have engaged in behaviour that s/he is worried about adults discovering. This can prevent a child from disclosing what has happened, or limit what s/he shares for fear of judgment, as a child may go into panic mode. Adolescents do not have the capacity or sophistication to manage such a complex situation when an adult is exploiting them. Parents have the capacity to show their children unconditional love and support in navigating these difficult situations.

Steps to take if you believe that your adolescent has had concerning contact with an adult online

1. Let your child know what you found online. Gently and calmly explain what this means.
2. Let her/him know that you realize what a difficult situation it must be for her/him and how difficult it is to talk about. Say something along the lines of "I am so sorry you are going through this and I know this is upsetting you. You are probably feeling desperate about what to do next." Confirm with her/him, "Am I right?".
3. Let your child know that you realize you don't have all of the facts about the situation and that you understand more may or may not have happened than you know about.
4. Reassure your child that you will get through this situation together and that s/he is not alone. You may experience defensiveness and resistance as your child goes through a variety of emotions, but it is important to let your child know that s/he doesn't have to deal with it alone. It also lets her/him know that you are going to deal with it and will not pretend it didn't happen.
5. Explain what needs to happen next, as law enforcement will need to be involved. Reassure the child that information will only be shared with others on a need-to-know basis and you will be very careful about who finds out.
6. Seek professional support from a therapist for your family and your child to help guide and support you all through the difficult experience.
7. Focus on the future and reassure your child that there is no problem too large that you will not get through together. Focus on all the experiences your child has to look forward to in the future.

Careful consideration needs to be taken when determining how to intervene when it is discovered that a child has had concerning contact with an adult online. There are a variety of factors that must be considered, such as how involved is the relationship between the young person and the adult, how does the young person perceive the relationship, how long has there been contact between the young person and the adult, etc. The circumstances surrounding the incident will be unique to each situation and thus must be considered on an individual basis. Outside support and guidance may be required to develop a plan for how to intervene with the child so that the necessary supports are in place in order to keep the child safe. Responses from children may range from relief the parent is involved to outrage that the parent is meddling in what they perceive to be a romantic relationship with the adult.



Model in Image. Intended as Illustrative.

