

INTERNET SAFETY



Children are growing up in a society that revolves around technology and electronics. Although useful and beneficial, the digital world presents many risks for children. Technology is ever changing so in order to protect children in the digital world, adults need to stay up-to-date on the latest technology. They need to be aware of the risks and know how to reduce these risks in order to keep children safe online.

Risks are not limited to any one site or device. Children, no matter their age, will likely encounter one of the following issues while online:

- Inappropriate Content
- Sexual Solicitation
- Privacy Violations
- Sexting
- Cyberbullying

The most important way to keep children safe online is by maintaining an open and ongoing dialogue regarding their online interests. Asking questions such as, “What is your favorite app?” or “What kind of pictures do you like to post?” lets them know you are interested and will keep an open mind. Children worry their device will be taken from them if they tell their caregivers about an issue they encountered online. Help children feel comfortable by talking about these issues and teach them how to make responsible choices online.

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

The Internet opens up an entire world of information and images, many of which are unhealthy and unsafe for children. Some inappropriate online content includes:

- Excessive violence or threats of violence
- Hate speech or offensive language
- Risky or illegal behaviors such as underage drinking and drug use
- Pornography or sexually suggestive material

Pornography has become pervasive throughout modern society. One study in the United States showed that 85% of adolescent males and 50% of adolescent females had been exposed to pornographic material. Children can accidentally encounter pornography when they are attempting to view other material on the Internet. They can also find pornographic material of a parent or other close adult. Sexual predators may also expose children to pornography in order to groom them for sexual exploitation.

Research shows that children report feelings of disgust, shock, embarrassment, anger, fear and sadness after viewing pornography. Once exposed, children can suffer symptoms of anxiety and depression, and they may become desensitized to healthy sexuality. Children who are exposed to pornography are statistically more likely to sexually assault their peers by imitating adult sex acts they have seen. This can be very disruptive and disturbing to children who witness or are victimized by this behavior.

WHAT CAREGIVERS CAN DO

Teach children what to do when they find inappropriate content online.

- Explain that they can push the back button or turn off the screen. Tell children they should always tell you or another trusted adult if they come across inappropriate content, or if they have questions about anything they see online.
- When children talk about inappropriate content they have seen, listen attentively and reassure them it is not their fault.
- Help children report anything that made them feel uncomfortable. If you believe they received the inappropriate content from a friend or shared it with someone else, you may want to notify the other caregivers or adults involved.

Prevent children from posting inappropriate content online.

- Establish expectations for acceptable and unacceptable online behavior. This might include what websites they can visit, what apps they can use, how long they can use them, what type of content they can post, and with whom they can chat.
- Review their posts and set consequences for inappropriate posts. Explain that posting inappropriate content online can put them at risk of being targeted by predators. Explain that it can damage their reputation and have long-term consequences. They can be punished at school, or worse, charged with a crime if the inappropriate content breaks the law. It can also hurt their chances of getting into college, getting a scholarship, or getting a job in the future, as many colleges and employers screen candidates through online searches.
- Review their friends' posts and use them as examples. Explain that their friends' posts can reflect poorly on them as well.

SEXUAL SOLICITATION

It is natural for children to be curious about sex. Unfortunately, there are people who will try to take advantage of this natural curiosity and make inappropriate sexual requests or solicitations. Sexual solicitation is any type of request made by an adult to a minor that is sexual in nature. Sexual solicitations are considered aggressive if the request includes actual or attempted offline contact through mail, by telephone, or in person. The majority of sexual and aggressive solicitations are made by an adult to older teenagers.

Most adolescents are casually solicited by peers and report not being bothered by it. They simply remove themselves from the situation by blocking the person who sent the inappropriate request, asking them to stop, or leaving the site. However, some sexual solicitations lead to dangerous online relationships. In these cases, predators begin a manipulative process called "grooming", where they begin to exploit children's vulnerabilities by offering them attention, affection and gifts. Predators may gradually introduce children to explicit images to lower their inhibitions, and then use their adult status to influence their behavior.

Talk to children about what they are doing and who they are talking to online if you see any of the following signs:

- Receiving gifts through the mail such as gift cards, cell phones, or webcams.
- Calling unknown numbers.
- Rejecting family and friends in favor of spending time online.
- Getting upset when not allowed online.
- Minimizing the screen or turning off the monitor when an adult walks into the room.

WHAT CAREGIVERS CAN DO

Keep children safe from predatory offenders.

- Talk to children in an age-appropriate way about sexuality and healthy relationships. Keep an open-door policy that nothing is off-limits in terms of what they can ask or talk to you about so they do not seek answers or inappropriate relationships online.
- Teach children about sexual grooming and ways that adults may try to manipulate them. Make it clear that flattery or any kind of sexual conversation from an adult is inappropriate and they should tell a trusted adult when someone behaves inappropriately.
- Set a policy that does not allow children to meet online friends in person. If you make an exception, establish rules to ensure the interaction is safe. Children should never agree to meet in person without their caregiver's permission and the accompaniment of a trusted adult. They should always meet in a public place and never leave with that person.
- Know and ask questions about the people on their friends list such as, "How did you meet?" and "What do you talk about?" Prohibit children from befriending people they do not personally know, but keep in mind that some offenders use the Internet to target minors they do already know. Tell children to check with their caregiver before responding to an adult who contacts them online, even if they know the adult.
- Above all, **call the police** if you suspect anyone is having inappropriate conversations or relationships with children online. This includes any one of the following:
 - Sending children photos or videos containing obscene content.
 - Asking children to send sexual images.
 - Speaking to children in a sexual manner.
 - Asking children to meet in person.

You can also make a report to cyber tip line at [CyberTipline.org](https://www.cybertipline.org) or **1-800-THE-LOST**. You should also file a report with the website or app where these conversations took place.

Children enjoy socializing by chatting online or over a video game. They also enjoy posting photos and comments on social media as a way to express themselves and document their lives. However, there is some personal information children should never reveal online without your approval. This includes their passwords, home address, location, cell phone number, or email address. You may think it is safer for your child to lie about their name and age online, but that is not the case. If they pretend to be older, their account has less default security restrictions. Be aware that many social media websites and apps have GPS settings that automatically publish the user's location. Thus, children may unknowingly reveal their physical location when they post photos or comments online.

Sharing personal information online leaves children vulnerable to the following security risks:

Identity theft: Children are often the target of identity theft because identify theft is difficult to detect until children are older, such as when they apply for their first bank account or credit card.

Online scams: Many young children are tricked into sharing passwords or visiting inappropriate websites by online scams promising prizes or money.

Hacking: Sharing passwords and other details can result in someone hacking into children's accounts and pretending to be them, or stealing files and other information stored on their computer.

WHAT CAREGIVERS CAN DO

Keep children from revealing too much personal information online.

- Set up and frequently check their privacy settings to ensure they are using settings that offer the most protection. Learn how to report issues such as stolen passwords or hacked accounts on the websites and games they are using.
- Establish rules about what information they can share and under what circumstances. Use scenarios to help them understand and practice the rules (i.e., "What if there was a pop-up on your computer that promised to send you a prize if you entered your address?"). Establish a rule that they only add friends they know in real life to their online friend lists.
- Create strong passwords that do not contain personal information. Frequently change their passwords and teach them not to share their passwords with anyone but their caregivers.

SEXTING

Sexting is when adolescents send or receive nude or partially nude images usually via cell phone. Adolescents may share sexual pictures with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or someone they are trying to impress. They may also sext in an attempt to be funny or have a sexual photo they can share with their friends. Fortunately, receiving a sext message is not as prevalent as viewing pornography. One study revealed that 7.1% of adolescents ages 12 to 17 had received a sext, and only 2.5% had sexted. However, another study found that adolescents who engage in sexting are more likely to be engaged in other risky behaviors, including unprotected sex.

WHAT CAREGIVERS CAN DO

Address the issue of sexting with children.

- Discuss the ways an image can spread outside of their control. Adolescents usually intend for only one person to see the images, but images do not always stay private. Even if they think their boyfriend or girlfriend would never forward their picture, there are other ways a photo could spread, such as if a phone is lost, borrowed or stolen. In addition, once a photo is posted online, it is nearly impossible to permanently delete and it can remain on the Internet indefinitely.
- Explain that sexting can have long-term consequences. Children can be humiliated or bullied if an image gets out. They can also be blackmailed by someone threatening to distribute images if they do not send more. They can also get in trouble at school or with the police for sending or forwarding a sexting image. They may not realize how they are violating trust and subjecting someone to ridicule when forwarding a sexting image.
- Teach the qualities of healthy sexual relationships. Emphasize that they cannot trust anyone who pressures them to send a sexual image.
- If you know of a child being coerced, blackmailed, or bullied in regard to sexting, do not ignore the situation. Help the children in this situation by reporting to the school, the police, or the cyber tip line at CyberTipline.org.

CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is the use of mobile technology or the Internet to bully or harass someone. Research tells us that about 25% of middle and high school students have been cyberbullied, and about 16% admitted to cyberbullying others. Most cyberbullying involves in-person bullying by someone your child knows, usually a classmate. Adolescents who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying differs from regular bullying in a number of ways. It spreads fast, involves a wider audience and is not contained to a specific environment like a school. Victims of cyberbullying cannot get away from it because technology and the Internet follows them everywhere. Therefore, they may feel unsafe and insecure at all times and in all places. Because cyberbullying is so far reaching, it can have a tremendous impact on children. Many cases of cyberbullying have led to anxiety, depression, anger, violence, and even suicide among adolescents.

Children may be victims of cyberbullying if they display any of the following signs:

- Suddenly stop using the computer or cell phone.
- Act nervous when receiving an email, direct message, or text message.
- Appear uneasy about going to school.
- Withdraw from friends and family.

Do not ignore or dismiss the problem. Cyberbullying can be very painful. Victims need to feel that you are taking the problem seriously and that you are going to do everything you can to help.

Sometimes caregivers discover their own children cyberbullying other children. Get involved and ask them to show you what they are doing if your child displays any of the following signs:

- Quickly switch screens or close programs when you walk by, or avoid discussions about what they are doing.
- Use technology excessively or get unusually upset if they cannot use technology.
- Laugh excessively while online.
- Use multiple online accounts or use an account that is not their own.

WHAT CAREGIVERS CAN DO

Help victims of cyberbullying.

- Block cyberbullies and set up new accounts, making sure children only give the new account information to friends they trust. Tell children not to respond to cyberbullies' messages. Take advantage of website features that allow you to block users.
- Report to the website or app where the cyberbullying is taking place. You might be able to report unwanted text messages to your cell phone provider and block certain numbers. You may also want to report to the school if the cyberbullying involves their students as the school may have specific rules against cyberbullying.
- If children were threatened or if any laws were broken, contact the police for help.

Prevent children from becoming a cyberbully.

- Teach children to respect others and establish expectations for online behavior. Make sure children know that bullying and cyberbullying are unacceptable. Children learn from the adults around them so it is important to model respectful online behavior.
- Set consequences for cyberbullying such as losing Internet privileges or increasing Internet supervision. If children have already been victims of cyberbullying, work with the school or organization to correct the problem.

Most children are not bullies or victims; they are bystanders. They do not speak up about cyberbullying because they are afraid of being targeted next or labeled a tattletale. However, information from bystanders is critical if teachers and other trusted adults are to take action. Encourage children not to be bystanders.

- Establish expectations for reporting. Teach them to tell you or another trusted adult when they see cyberbullying. Explain that staying silent allows bullying to continue and the opportunity for others to get hurt.
- Encourage them to stand up for the victim when they feel it is safe to do so. That might mean telling the bully to stop or refusing to join in the bullying. They can also support to the victim by being his or her friend.
- Help them report cyberbullying to the website where it is taking place or to a trusted adult at school. Bystanders will feel more confident about reporting if they have the reassurance they are doing the right thing, so help them see it through.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESOURCES

Remember, communicating openly with children is the best way to keep them safe while online, but we also recommend the following resources to help you in this effort.

FILTERING AND MONITORING SOFTWARE

You can install filtering and monitoring software on your devices to protect children from seeing sexually explicit content. You can even set it up to notify you if they are receiving inappropriate messages. We cannot endorse any particular brand of software, but encourage you to visit www.getnetwise.org to search for the software that best suits your needs.

CELL PHONE PROVIDERS

Some cell phone providers offer options to monitor children's cell phones and text message history. Check with your cell phone provider to see what security options they have available.

BUILT-IN SECURITY FEATURES

Some laptops, tablets, and gaming consoles have built-in monitoring options or software for purchase. Most websites and apps have their own privacy and filtering settings. Consult each one to help you better understand their systems. For example, Google has a free SafeSearch option and many apps have the option to turn off chat features or limit who can see what your child posts within the app. For a list of help centers that have this type of information, visit the NetSmartz Tech Tip Sheet at www.netsmartz.org/TipSheets.

GUIDES TO WEBSITES AND APPS

There are guides to help parents and caregivers stay knowledgeable and up-to-date on the latest websites and apps that children are using. To access this information, visit the following sites:

www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting

www.foreverymom.com/dangerous-apps-kids-safe-online/

www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-12-apps-that-every-parent-of-a-teen-should-know-about_us_56c34e49e4b0c3c55052a6ba

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