Stop It Now! · prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.

Keeping Children and Youth Safe Online

Social media and the internet offer children and youth many opportunities for education, recreation, and socialization. It has become a part of our everyday lives and a necessary component in many ways, even for young children. There are many fun and positive experiences available for everyone, including youth online, but navigating it safely is not always easy. We can keep children and youth safe by addressing social media and internet safety in our conversations with them and other safe adults in their lives, in our family safety planning, and by learning as much as we can about safety online.

What are the risks

There are a number of risks that are important to be aware of when a child or youth is using social media or the internet, including an overall sense of anonymity. People can pretend to be anyone they want behind a screen. It may seem like the internet isn't the "real world" but it very much is, and there are very real people on each end of the screen. It can be easy for a young person to confuse anonymity with privacy, which are very different when it comes to social media and the internet.

Additionally, there is a great sense of pressure to present yourself in a certain way online, especially social media, and to conform to the way others might interact. Because this is all happening behind a screen it might feel 'safe' and a child or youth may engage in activities they would not otherwise such as posting sexualized images or talking with unsafe individuals. When a child or youth does not conform to social media norms they may face bullying or other negative reactions from their peers.

It's also easy for youth to get caught up in the moment - to bully, harass, pressure, or engage in unsafe behaviors online that they may not ever consider acting on in school or when with friends face-to-face. It's important for kids to have pathways to speak up about being on the receiving end of harm, and for adults to have open dialogues about the potential to harm others too.

Preparing for Online Safety

Understanding how to make social media and the internet safer for everyone is key. Here are some helpful tips:

Preparing the environment

- Keep devices in a common room where you can see the screen whenever possible and consider co-viewing with younger children
- Don't allow apps to share data from personal devices
- Create a passcode for devices and set age appropriate filters and/or browser blockers to prevent access to unsafe content
- Set time limits and clear expectations for digital media use

- Disable microphone or camera access when appropriate
- Check out sites before they use it to make sure they are age-appropriate or have them ask for permission first
- Basic cell phone safety rules should be added to existing family safety plans, such as:
  - be cautious and assume that even private texts can become public
  - verify the caller and don't respond if you don't know who is calling
  - be cautious about what you post and explain the risk of using location services on any posts you make

Discuss and review with youth

- Help youth turn their location off in the settings tab of any app, platform or console they use, and remind them not to post photos, videos or posts sharing where they are
- Explain to youth how to use privacy settings to make sure only approved friends can see their posts and images
- Ask them to show you which social media platforms, gaming consoles, and apps they use, have them explain what they like about each, and talk about how they can use them safely
- Make sure they know how to report posts on different social media sites and encourage them to come and talk to you if they see anything that upsets them or makes them feel uncomfortable
- Discuss with children what is okay to share and what is not okay to share online
  - ex: It is okay to share your username or email address, but it is not okay to share your password with anyone
- Talk to children and youth about the reality of pornography and then teach them what to do if they encounter it
- Talk to children and youth about how to be safe citizens online in ongoing discussions

Addressing online friends

Making new friends often happens online so it's important for a child or youth to understand how to navigate this safely. It can be common for children to tell you that they know everyone they talk to through social media or the internet, but this may mean that they have talked online only and have never actually met in person. It is important to clarify with children the difference between online friends and friends they make in-person, that they can see face-to-face. As close as they may feel to any online friend, there are limits to what they will be able to know about them, and youth should know that some people may seek to mask their true identity. It is easy for someone with harmful intentions to pretend they are a child, a classmate, or a friend's friend just by looking through a person's friend list and finding out what town they live in or school they go to.

Not every person they meet online is at risk to harm them, but it is important to be mindful that they do not know who might be on the other side of the screen. Every interaction with a person that they do not know in real life should be taken with appropriate precautions.

General Tips for Parents

- Review their friend list or followers together with them on social media
- Consider restricting the ability for adults to friend, like, or follow your child on social media platforms (if possible)
- Remind youth not to share any personal information like their full name, birthdate, address, phone number, email, any other identifying demographics, or any pictures of themselves with people they meet online

- Talk with them about coming to a trusted adult if any interaction with an online friend becomes unsafe or uncomfortable, even if they're worried that they may have done something that breaks a family safety rule
- Discuss with them that they should never agree to meet with someone that they have met online without letting someone else know know their plan, preferably a parent or another other trusted adult
- Role-play with them to see how they would handle certain situations, and help them problem-solve with you

Safety Planning by Developmental Stage

The way that a young child uses the internet and the content that they are accessing is very different from a youth who is older and maybe in their teens. We need to understand the unique needs for every child or youth using online platforms in order to keep everyone safe.

Children under 5

Ongoing supervision and engagement is key for children this age, and we can talk about and model safe online behaviors to help children early use this technology safely, establishing family safety rules around screen time and viewing behaviors.

Conversation and engagement tips:

- "You can use my phone to play this game. Can you show me how you play it?"
- "It's fun to look at animal videos together, so let's set a limit of 30 minutes but then we'll turn off the tablet and play outside."
- "Can you tell me what's happening in this video we're watching?"

School-aged Children

At this age, children are most often exploring the internet and using media interactively. While there are age restrictions on many social media sites, kids are curious and will seek out information and activities that are not always safe or appropriate. Clear safety planning rules and guidelines are key.

Conversation and engagement tips:

- "Can you tell me a little bit about this game you are playing with your friends? It seems like you really like it - what is your favorite part about it?"
- "It's important to create safe usernames and passwords for any sites you are using so that no one else can log into your account. Let's set it up together so I can show you how."
- "I'd like to be able to allow more time for you to use your devices, so I think it's important that we include some new family safety planning rules about what sites are okay to visit and what to do if you come across something that might feel uncomfortable."

Tweens (9-12)

By this age, kids are using the internet in various ways and usually have their own devices. They are utilizing the internet to socialize with peers and there is an increasing desire for privacy on their devices.

Conversation and engagement tips:

- "It can be dangerous to post any personal information, or even your location, online - so I want to make sure we talk about what information is okay and not okay to share with others and how to safely navigate all the apps you're using."
- "If you ever make a mistake online or see something that makes you uncomfortable, you can come to me and I will not be mad and you will not be in trouble. I am here to be supportive."
- "Do you know how to report, flag, or block people on the websites and apps you use? Can you show me how you would do that?"
- "I hope you know that you have the right to say "NO" to anyone who talks about or asks you to do something that makes you uncomfortable, even if it's someone you care about."

Teens (12+)

Teens, while experienced and often savvy with social media and the internet, can struggle to navigate situations that become potentially risky. Parental controls are less impactful with teens, especially older adolescents, and often limitations on their screen time and other safety rules are not always effective. So, parents and caring adults can best create safety in the environment by making sure there is access to accurate information about healthy sexuality and relationships, being available and supportive, and continuing to model safe behaviors. Be open and honest with teens and help them feel comfortable talking to you about their online activity. Ask questions and give advice suitable for teenagers. We can't always restrict what they do, so giving them tips to use social media and the internet safely is critically important.

Conversation and engagement tips:
- "I've been reading a lot about young people feeling bullied into sending naked pics of themselves. Has anyone ever pressured you into sending pictures like that?"
- "I know there can be a lot of peer pressure to act a certain way or post risky pictures on social media, but I want you to know that you can say NO and that it does not feel safe."
- "Let's talk about ways that you can stay safe when you meet with this new friend from your online game. Where do you plan to meet them, and will you have another friend with you?"

Learn More

These resources offer more guidance and resources for keeping children and youth safe online.
- Warning signs a young person may be the target of sexual abuse online
- FAQ: How do people sexually exploit children and youth online?
- Resource Guide: Online safety for parents and youth