



Talking with Children and Youth about Online Safety

Parents, teachers, and youth leaders understand the need to talk with children and youth about the potential dangers online. Yet, these conversations don't happen as often as they should; when they do, they often miss the mark in affecting any measurable change. Learning how to talk with children and youth about the power of social media and the Internet can give adults the confidence and resources they need to have this important conversation.

Educate Yourself

The Internet changes with lightning speed, often leaving parents and adults in the dark when it comes to understanding the dangers of the Internet. Before any meaningful conversation can occur, adults must invest in educating themselves in digital landscape.

Knowledge of how young people are using the Internet gives adults the opportunity to direct the conversation to relevant topics. This gives the adults more credibility in the eyes of young people, which makes them more likely to take seriously the advice the adults are giving them.

Some of the areas parents and adults should stay current in, include:

- **Text Slang**—A whole new language of abbreviations and slang has developed in the

digital space. Understanding what kids are actually saying is important as you monitor their online communication.

- **Social Media**—Familiarize yourself with social media platforms currently popular with young people. Create an account and spend time on the app to understand how it is used.
- **Online Games**—Online gaming has grown increasingly social in recent years. Many popular games are designed to be played by groups of people who connect online and even talk together while playing. Know what the latest game craze is, how it's played, and if there is a risk of meeting strangers.

Focus on Real Challenges

When talking with young people about the Internet, resist the urge to reduce the conversation to simply



saying, “the Internet is bad.” Internet use is deeply embedded in today’s society, especially in educational curriculum in the earliest years of elementary school. Children and youth also see how frequently adults use the Internet, which can give them the impression of a double standard.

Teaching children and youth about the real challenges of the Internet empowers them to safely navigate the Internet. This is a skill they will need for the rest of their life and the sooner they can develop it, the better off they will be.

While it’s important to have age-appropriate conversations with young people, the dangers of the Internet do not discriminate on the basis of age. Anything that exists on the Internet is available to anyone.

Important topics about online safety you should be able to cover with children and youth include:

- What content is inappropriate and how to avoid it
- Verifying someone’s identity

- Recognizing online scams
- Identifying credible information
- Privacy protection
- Strong password management
- “Oversharing” on social media
- The permanence of things said online
- Proper responses to cyberbullying

Foster Open Discussion

When it comes time to have a conversation about online safety with children and youth, it’s important to frame the conversation as a discussion rather than a lecture. Foster an environment where they are comfortable about having open and honest dialogue with you.

The virtual world is no different than the real one and this age group is often self-conscious and insecure. They may even have their own concerns about the Internet and what they experience there. Having a discussion with young people gives them the opportunity to express those fears and find reassurance and guidance from parents and adults.



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