New Jersey Department of Education

New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect

Online Safety Guide for Parents & Caregivers:

Keeping Children and Youth Safe while Connected

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Introduction

As the widespread use of smartphones, tablets, software applications (apps), and social media have become increasingly more common, so have the number of hours young people are spending online. This increase became even more notable during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools shifted to virtual learning environments. Additionally, this increase of time spent online extends to younger children (those under the age of eight), which increases their exposure to online safety risks such as with the viewing of inappropriate adult content.[1]

The internet can be a positive and beneficial tool. It allows youth to:

- Utilize resources for learning and education.
- Connect with their peers and loved ones.
- Engage in entertainment (i.e., gaming or streaming music).
- Express themselves and build or develop their identity.[2,3]

However, there are also dangers associated with internet and social media use such as cyberbullying, online solicitation, and exposure to inappropriate content.[4,5] For example, a 2018 comparison of multiple research studies found that for youth aged 12-16, approximately 1 in 5 experience unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material while 1 in 9 experience online sexual solicitation.[6]

This guide provides parents and caregivers with information and resources regarding online risks and the role they can play to protect, educate, and empower children and youth to safely navigate the internet.

What are the most common online risks?

Exposure to Adult Content and Sexually Explicit Materials

When children and youth use the internet, they may be at-risk to exposure of harmful content that could include violent or sexually explicit content. Whether being exposed through their own online activity or through someone else introducing it to them (i.e., online, through a device, in-person on the school bus), viewing such materials can be scary, confusing, or traumatizing for the child and calls for further conversation with a trusted adult to ease any potential harm.

Did you know: When children are exposed to sexually inappropriate material, it can lead to sexually reactive behaviors such as the child acting out what they had seen with siblings or peers.

Exposure to and Production of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

Still referred to as child pornography within US federal legislation, CSAM is any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor.[7] With CSAM being shared on internet platforms, there is a very real risk that a child could become exposed to this type of content or may become a victim involved in the production of such materials (see sexting and sextortion).

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is any bullying or harassment that occurs online, including emails, text messages, online games, apps, or social media sites. Some examples of cyberbullying include sending or posting negative or harmful content about someone else, as well as sharing private information that could cause embarrassment or humiliation.[8] This is an especially troubling issue when compared to traditional bullying, as this type of harassment follows a victim home and wherever they have access to a device. Additionally, with the anonymity many online platforms provide, the child may not even be aware of who the bully is.

Predators, Human Trafficking, Online Enticement, and Grooming

Predators/traffickers have long been on the lookout for opportunities to target children and adolescents. Similar to in-person recruitment, they will go wherever children and youth gather and that includes whichever popular online platforms are currently being utilized most by youth. Commonly known to use grooming tactics to deceptively gain a child's trust, predators/traffickers are skilled at identifying perceived needs within a youth's life and deploying various strategies to seemingly fill those needs (e.g., love, belonging, connection, etc.) to develop a bond later used to exploit the child.

Online Gaming

Similar to social media applications, gaming sites where users can connect with other players present chances for predators to seek out opportunities to groom and exploit children. While any child can be at-risk, CyberTipline reports have found that young boys are more likely to be targeted by predators for online enticement within gaming platforms.[9] With online gaming becoming an increasingly popular activity for youth, it is critical that conversations around online safety extend here. Internet Safety 101 offers parent tips for how to stay safe on gaming sites.

Sexting

Sexting is the sharing and receiving of sexually explicit messages (whether nude or partially nude) via text messages or through various applications with messaging abilities such as Snapchat or WhatsApp. Oftentimes, youth are sharing with other youth that they are in romantic relationships with or want to get closer or more intimate with. What may start out as sexting can lead to sextortion. It is important to speak with youth about the consequences of sharing private images and how the person receiving may share the image with others. Once an image is out there, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have the images removed from the internet.[10]

Sextortion

Sextortion is a form of online exploitation where the offender uses dishonest or coercive tactics such as grooming and blackmail to obtain sexual content or sexual acts from youth, or even to get money from them. While the offender may already have gotten an image of the youth to blackmail them, sextortion can also begin as a grooming process. It may start with the offender sharing explicit photos with the child to normalize it, then through building their relationship and trust, the offender convinces the child or youth to send them similar images to then be used against the child or youth.[11] This crime has affected children as young as **eight years old**,[12] with a 2017 report by Thorn

showing that **one in four** survey participants who had experienced sextortion were **13 or younger** when threatened.[13]

Phishing/Unsafe downloads

Phishing is when scammers trick people into sharing personal, financial, or otherwise sensitive information through the use of text messages, emails, or pop-up messages.[14] These messages contain links that if clicked, may download malware or viruses onto your device.

As a parent or caregiver, how can I help keep my child(ren) safe online?

Children thrive when clear expectations are set and reasonable boundaries are defined. Be sure to talk with your children and make sure they understand the expectations you have for them when engaging online. In addition to having conversations about expected behavior while online, the following suggestions can further assist in keeping your children safe:

Keep computers/devices in open areas (especially for younger children).[15] Be on the lookout for behaviors such as quickly minimizing or closing windows whenever you are within view of their screen.

Set rules around cell phone/device usage. Take time to consider and decide upon family rules and values as they relate to online use, (i.e., How many hours a day is the child permitted online? Does the parent or caregiver have to approve use of apps before they can be downloaded?). [16] Then discuss potential consequences when those rules or values are broken (i.e., if too much use or inappropriate use occurred). The American Academy of Pediatrics offers assistance for parents and caregivers on developing a Family Media Plan.

Create "device-free" times. Some examples to consider are during mealtimes, family time, and one hour before bedtimes. This presents an opportunity to strengthen family bonds and connection, a protective factor, and to practice social emotional and self-regulation skills.

Additional tip: Consider setting up a charging station for devices in the parent(s)'/caregiver(s)' room. When it is time for your child to go to bed, their device remains there until the next morning.

Model healthy device/online usage.[17] Parents and caregivers can model healthy device usage by participating in device-free times as well. Engaging with your children offers another opportunity to take a technology break and give them your full attention.

Encourage healthy online habits.[18] Any child who is spending time online should be aware of the following information in an age-appropriate way.

- Do not exchange personal information such as your name, address, or location.
- Never share passwords, even with friends.
- Do not post or share private photos. If you wouldn't want a teacher or grandparent to see it, you should probably not be sharing.
- Tell a trusted adult about any communications that were scary or hurtful.

- *Never* agree to meet someone they've met online without parental approval and supervision.
- Keep *location enabled services* turned to "off".
- Have privacy settings set (i.e., keep profiles private so that strangers cannot add you as a friend or view your content).

Monitor online/gaming activity.

- Set available parental controls through browsers, apps, and devices. While this will help to minimize accidental exposure to inappropriate materials, it is important to remember it is not 100% foolproof, making conversations with children and youth all the more important.
- Periodically check browsing history on devices and review your child's "friends" list across applications. Have them remove any friends they do not know in real life.[19]
- Consider use of digital monitoring software and applications that can help with the work of monitoring your child's messages, emails, etc. for potential safety concerns. The age and appropriateness for your child should be taken into account. [20]

Connect with your child's school.

- Children and youth are learning about online safety within their schools. Connect with your school's administrator or curriculum office to learn more about the online safety education your child is receiving. Seek opportunities to reinforce or extend their learning at home.

Additional Notes[21]:

Young children – should be supervised closely and not allowed to leave sites that parents or caregivers have approved or are okay with them using. This will help to prevent them from stumbling onto sites with content that could scare or confuse them.

Adolescents – As they are becoming more independent and may have personal cell phones and devices it may be challenging to implement some of the suggestions above. However, teens need to know that you want to learn about what they're doing online and who they're talking to. Set reasonable expectations and if something goes wrong, work together to prevent it from happening again.

How do I best talk with my child about online safety?

Having conversations about online safety with your children is one of the best ways to keep them protected. These conversations should happen regularly and start as soon as your child begins using a device as children and youth need assistance in developing the necessary skills to manage and navigate their online usage. Creating an environment in which your child feels safe and open talking with you is a great first step.

These conversations should also complement other age-appropriate conversations that can begin with your children as early as 3 years old, such as their rights to body boundaries, safety, and consent. Having discussions about privacy and safety (both on and offline) regularly provides the needed repetition to help children learn and process these important messages.[22]

How can I create an open and welcoming environment where my child feels safe having these conversations?

- Take advantage of opportunities when your child is trying to communicate with you. Give your full attention and actively listen to what they have to say. Being present will show your child that you genuinely care about what they have to share and will encourage future conversations.[23]

- Carve out time each day to talk and engage with your child. Creating a dedicated time lets your child know they are important and strengthens the bond you share.[24]

- Approach these conversations calmly and without judgement, minimizing any shame or guilt. A fear of getting in trouble can affect a child's decision to seek help. Knowing they can come to you when there is a problem or a confusing situation without getting in trouble increases the chance you will become aware of any problems early on.[25]

- Consider using a strengths-based approach when talking with your child to further build a positive connection and relationship.

> *Safety Tip*: Encourage your child to tell you or another trusted adult if anyone shows them images that are confusing or difficult to understand **or** if their body boundaries were not respected. Be sure to minimize any shame or embarrassment and recognize their bravery and courage within these conversations.

How can I help prepare and empower my child(ren) to make safe choices while online?

- Use everyday opportunities to talk with your children about being online.[26] The McCain Institute at Arizona State University provides some simple ideas on how to get the conversation started.

- Rather than lecture, approach conversations with curiosity and involve youth as active participants in them. Take time to explore games and applications with your children and learn what they like about them. Take an interest in their online interests.

- Engage with your children's educators, support professionals, and curriculum leaders to learn more about the personal and online safety programming your children are receiving through their school's curriculum. Seek opportunities to reinforce or extend their learning at home.

- In addition to encouraging healthy online habits, it can be helpful to share with your child some of the warning signs of predators. Examples include:
  - Conversations being steered toward sexual themes.
  - Gift giving.
  - Asking to keep the relationship a secret.
  - Trying to move the conversation to a more private app.[27]

Note: Though it is important to educate and empower our children, it is equally critical that the responsibility for protection does not solely fall to them. There are warning signs that parents and caregivers can be aware of to help identify potential grooming or exploitation of their children.

Where can I find resources for additional tips?

For resources that share more specific tips, please see the following:

CSAM
Family guide on Coping with Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) Exposure.

Gaming/Mobile Apps
NetSmartz – Gaming Safety Tip Sheet (also available in Spanish).

NJ Children's Alliance – Most Dangerous Mobile Apps for Kids.

Online Enticement
Common Sense Media - What Should Kids and Teens Know if Online Strangers Contact Them? (Breaks down information for Elementary and then Middle/High School.)

Sexting/Sextortion
NetSmartz – "Your Photo Fate" Discussion Guide.

Thorn – Talk to your kids about sextortion.

How do I get help or report suspicious activity?

If your child has experienced a traumatic event, in addition to involving law enforcement and other professionals such as your child's pediatrician, you may wish to consider partnering with your child's school counselor or other support professional to learn of supports available to your child from within the school.

There are also steps you can take as their parent or caregiver to support their healing and well-being. Please see the resources below for additional information:

- Children's Bureau Factsheet for Families – Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma.
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network – Families and Caregivers resource page.

There are many toll-free hotlines and helplines that can be contacted for help, crisis intervention, and resources. Additionally, NJ offers parents warmlines, which provide **non-emergency** information, support, and resources.

If your child or a young person you know has been involved in a suspicious online incident, you can submit a report to:

- The NJ Computer Crimes Task Force Hotline (**1-888-648-6007**) for those living in New Jersey.
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)'s CyberTipline | **1-800-THE-LOST.**
- Your local law enforcement agency.

- Contact your local FBI field office or submit a tip online.[28]

Additional Resources to Explore

Common Sense Media – For parents and caregivers to read reviews of appropriate tv/gaming media for specific age levels. Also includes a "Parents Need to Know" Tab where they can search by age or topic and view different guides specific to various popular apps.

EPCAT-USA's Guides to Online Safety – Provides youth, parents, and educators information on grooming, sexting, and sextortion, and provides tips on rule-setting and how to speak with your kids.

NetSmartz Tip Sheets – for tweens, teens, and parents on navigating digital safety topics such as sexting, sextortion, gaming, and more.

Shared Hope International – This internet safety guide provides adults with knowledge of technology dangers, (i.e., apps, gaming, and sexting), as well as tips for monitoring children online and on how to have conversations with children about online interactions.

STOP.THINK.CONNECT. Parent and Educator Resources – The Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency provides a menu of resources on cybersecurity and online safety.

Disclaimer: The resources provided on this resource are for informational purposes only. All resources must meet the New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) accessibility guidelines. Currently, the NJDOE aims to conform to Level AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1). However, the NJDOE does not guarantee that linked external sites conform to Level AA of the WCAG 2.1. Neither the NJDOE nor its officers, employees or agents, specifically endorse, recommend or favor these resources or the organizations that created them. Please note that the NJDOE has not reviewed or approved the materials related to the programs.

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