

Internet Safety, Social Media And How To Navigate These Topics With Your Child

Beth Jackson, MS, LPC
Community Education
Program
Manager/Therapist

The internet and social media

- All is mobile – more than 80%+ of users accessing internet through mobile devices – tablets and cell phones
- Apps account for 90%+ of time spent on mobile devices. This is especially true for children and teens.
- Social media – all “lumped” together: internet, texting, gaming, and video as all are increasingly social.
- Blocking and filtering is difficult as most children/teens remain connected at all times AND they know how to work around it.

When do kids get access?

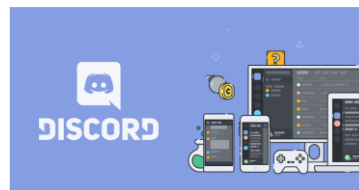
- 2017: 75% of children age 8 and under have access to a smart phone for more than 48 minutes a day and 38% of children under age 2 have used a mobile device.
- 2021: 42% of kids have a phone by age 10. By age 12 it's 71%. By 14, it's 91%.
 - This is already old data...

Trends for children and teens: video chat, live streaming and video messaging (public and private); chosen platforms for interacting remains fluid

- TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube remain the most popular
- Google Hangouts/Meet, What's App popularity are growing
- Facebook, Messenger, Twitter still in the mix.

Other trends

- Discord: a free voice, video and text chat app used to talk and hang out with their own “invite only” communities and friends (create their own “server”).
- Dating apps: Yobu and Tinder; can also be anonymous: Omegle and Chatroulette.
- MMO – massive multiplayer online games: Roblox, Fortnite, World of War Craft, Mine Craft and many more via many other devices (girls now increasingly gaming; not just the boys anymore).



Other trends

- Augmented reality (AR) – still in the real world, but enhanced – Pokemon Go from a few years ago
- Virtual reality (VR) – completely immersed in another place or world
 - Pornography industry capitalizing on boys' love of VR in gaming
- Hidden vault apps
 - Allows users to hide pictures, videos, texting, etc.: can look like anything (calculator, etc.)
 - Often passcode or password protected – you try to break in, takes your picture and sends break-in report to user.
 - **KEEP in mind: the majority of teens and kids now texting and messaging through apps.**
- Mapping/geolocation on MANY apps or they are adding the service.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- Gaining momentum - technology is **rapidly** advancing.
- ChatGPT: Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer “developed by an AI research company, Open AI. It is an artificial intelligence chatbot technology that can process our natural human language and generate a response. Simply put – you can ask Chat GPT a question, and it will give you an answer.”
 - Concerns: can use fake/false information to fill in the gaps, exacerbate the already numerous “conspiracy theories”, plagiarism, etc.

AI – pictures and videos

- AI image generation technology that allows anyone to save a handful of photos (or video frames) of you, then “train” AI to create realistic fake photos or videos.
- Once AI learns how to “render” someone, their image can be used to create an infinite number of photos or videos and the AI model can be shared with other people.
- Can be used to create fake photos or videos of anyone doing embarrassing or illegal things - “deep fakes”.
- Numerous issues:
 - Kids and teens could be bullied – a person’s appearance or location could be altered to be humiliating and then shared with peers.
 - Create “fake” child sexual abuse material (CSAM – formerly known as child pornography) – this is already occurring: “This explosion of disturbingly realistic images could help normalize child sexual exploitation, lure more children into harm’s way and make it hard for law enforcement to find actual children being harmed.”

Online sexual offenses against youth

- Perpetrators (Finkelhor, et. al., 2022)
 - The proportions of perpetrators who were in-person intimate partners, friends, and acquaintances outnumbered those who were online-only contacts.
 - Even for those perpetrators who were online-only contacts, many were other youth or young adults.
- Many factors at play for children and teens; people take advantage of:
 - They are very concerned about physical appearance.
 - They increasingly look to peers for approval rather than parents and other adults.
 - They have increased curiosity and exploration around sex.
 - They naturally explore and have a great deal of interest in dating and romantic partnerships – looking for acceptance and “love”.
 - They are often given inaccurate information by peers and/or find inaccurate information online.
 - Impulsivity and risk taking are both a natural and large part of this stage.
 - Non-heterosexual youth are more than twice as likely to be victimized as many individuals turn to peers for support because they fear judgement from adults.

What to do?

- Don't just focus on stranger danger: focus on risky behaviors – sexual pictures/videos/conversations, inappropriate sites, TMI, secrets. Discuss how both those they know in person and “online friends” can MANIPULATE them.
- Maintain open dialogue with children about healthy sexuality and healthy relationships throughout their development.
 - Include information on healthy vs. unhealthy behaviors in dating relationships AND friendships (right to privacy, balance of time for themselves and the other person, etc.).
 - Help them plan how to manage the “asks” for too much information, nudes, etc.; don't assume they know. “Just say no” is not enough.
 - Include talking with them about how adults (including young adults: 18/19+) should not be seeking “romantic” relationships with teens – this behavior is not appropriate and manipulative.
 - They put themselves at risk by both sharing and asking for nudes.
- Encourage them to talk with you if they are experiencing any situation that makes them feel uncomfortable. HOWEVER, don't take away (or threaten to take away) access to their devices! Teens (and kids) report this is the primary reason they often don't tell adults when something is going on.

Overexposure

- Posting personal/private information about themselves
- Self-published sexual videos and pictures; also called self-generated child sexual abuse material
 - Adults call it sexting; kids/teens call it sending nudes.
 - Not just teens; kids of all ages have engaged in the behavior.
 - Good news: the majority of youth report they do not “sext.” However, more than a quarter of teens share they have received images from someone else.
 - Common scenarios:
 - romantic partners sharing images;
 - sharing of images outside of the relationship for revenge;
 - sharing image with someone whom the sender wants to be involved; flirting;
 - Someone takes a screen shot or records a person flashing their body parts or sexual behavior (victim often is unaware).
 - Sometimes it is just a joke – “mooning”

Sextortion

- A type of blackmail used to acquire additional sexual content from the victim, coerce them into engaging in sexual activity, or to obtain money from the child.
- Often, children and teens feel trapped and they don't know how to get out of a situation and away from the perpetrator. They DON'T want to tell. Why?
 - They accepted gifts or money.
 - They are afraid their access to devices will be removed.
 - They have done something that causes them to feel ashamed such as sending inappropriate pictures/video or done something over any video chat app they wish they had not.
 - The person tells the kid/teen they have committed a felony by making and sending inappropriate selfies/videos and the kid/teen will go to jail if they tell anyone. Yes, they have broken two laws by making and sending inappropriate selfies/videos.
 - Currently there is a trend of targeting boys through gaming.
 - 60% of sextortion victims reported the offender is someone they know (NOT stranger danger).

What to do?

- Encourage critical thinking: all of us need to think before we post: what would a prospective employer or college recruiter think of it?
 - For sending nudes: Must address the sender, the requester, the recipients and the re-sharers. Build empathy and avoid blaming (this stops kids/teens from getting help); again, discuss healthy vs. unhealthy relationships.
- Inform children of all ages (**yes, even the younger ones**) that what they post is PUBLIC and PERMANENT – can hang around even if the service is promising the post, picture or video is available for a short time (Instagram, Snapchat).
 - Include what is appropriate and not appropriate – don't assume they know.
 - HOWEVER, there are services that can help youth take down nudes: Take it Down. <https://takeitdown.ncmec.org/>
- When they are video chatting or posting pictures, realize others may be taking screen shots or recording what they are doing without their knowledge.
- Help children/teens think critically: **YOU CAN'T TAKE IT BACK.**

Cyberbullying

- Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else, causing embarrassment or humiliation. It typically takes place over repeatedly over time with the intent of causing harm.
- Language children and teens use: bullying in elementary school; drama describes a host of interpersonal conflicts that occur in middle and high school.
- Recent research suggests the incidence of cyberbullying has not changed much over the last few years, BUT girls three times more likely to be cyberbullied than boys.

Cyberbullying

- Most cyberbullying is related to real life situations (school, neighborhood, church, etc.).
- Digital harassment by partners: constant messaging, wanting to see texts from others, asks for passwords to social media accounts, etc. Use pressure and coercion.
- Sextortion can be considered a severe form of cyberbullying
- Often, parents and caregivers wonder why children and teens don't reach out for help or report cyberbullying and sextortion – why?
 - They have done something embarrassing and/or made a mistake and they fear being judged and punished.
 - They fear access to their devices will be taken away.
 - They believe they should be able to fix it on their own; they may also fear the adult response(s) will make the situation worse.
 - They don't know how to talk about it.
 - Middle schoolers and high schoolers sometimes don't perceive it as cyberbullying, but more as online conflict.

What to do?

- If your child is a victim: help them understand it is not their fault. However, if a child bullies others, she/he puts themselves at risk of being the target.
- Encourage kids **not to reply or respond** to what is being said about them. Their friends should also be told not to respond on their behalf.
- Empower kids to be allies – when they see mean/nasty posts, texts or tweets about someone, encourage them to send a kind one (anonymously if needed).
- Tell adults – and how can we be helpful?
 - Listen to what they have to say
 - Collaborate with them about how to solve the problem (don't take over)
 - Check in with them to see how things are going
- BLOCK bully from access to cell phone/social networking apps.
- Inform school and police when necessary.
- Don't erase or delete messages: keep them as evidence.
- Encourage kids to NEVER share passwords with any friends.
- DON'T TOLERATE YOUR OWN KIDS BEING BULLIES OR HARASSING OTHERS.

Overall tips

- Model the behavior you want to see: strive for balance as a family and disconnect at times.
 - Some kids report they want to disconnect but feel pressure to always be connected. Offer to be the bad guy (do they really need their phones at night? NO).
- Talking and communicating with your children throughout their development about how to use social media responsibly.
 - Communication is a two-way street: listen, be supportive and have an open mind; get their input by asking them what they think is reasonable and what they think being safe means.
 - Plan ahead of potential issues – what will they do when someone shows them, asks for, or sends them a sexual picture or video? Include exposure to pornography in this discussion.
 - Discuss issues using empathy – how would they feel if?
 - Try not to overreact when issues do come up – use them as teachable moments (if you overreact, they will simply go “underground”).

Overall tips

- Use and be familiar with the technology you are allowing your kids to use: gaming, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, Discord etc.
- Can monitor and spy, but nothing takes the place of communication; remember they know how to get around much of our monitoring.
 - Can monitor through your service: your child cannot download apps without your permission.
 - Can set so you see all their communication via many apps like Snapchat (Google for this information).
- Help kids understand what is real and what is not – from body image to conspiracy theories.
- Some populations at increased risk of bullying, exploitation: questioning sexual orientation or gender.

Staying informed - resources

- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NetSmartz resources): www.internetmatters.org
- www.common sense media.org
- www.connectsafely.org
- www.webwisekids.org
- University of New Hampshire: Crimes Against Children Resource Center:
<http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/>
- www.thorn.org

Citations

- *21st Century Technology & The Exploitation of Children: Where Are They Going & What are They Doing?* Online Training by Justin Fitzsimmons, JD, SEARCH Group, Inc., July 25, 2019.
- Crimes Against Children Children Research Center: unh.edu/ccrc
- Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., & Colburn, D. (2022). The prevalence of online sexual offenses against children in the US. *JAMA Open network*, 5(10).
- Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Youth Attitudes and Experiences in 2020:
https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/SGCSAM_Attitudes&Experiences_YouthMonitoring_FullReport_2021.pdf?promo_name=SG_monitoring&promo_id=research_button.
- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children:
<https://www.missingkids.org/NetSmartz>
- www.connectsafely.org