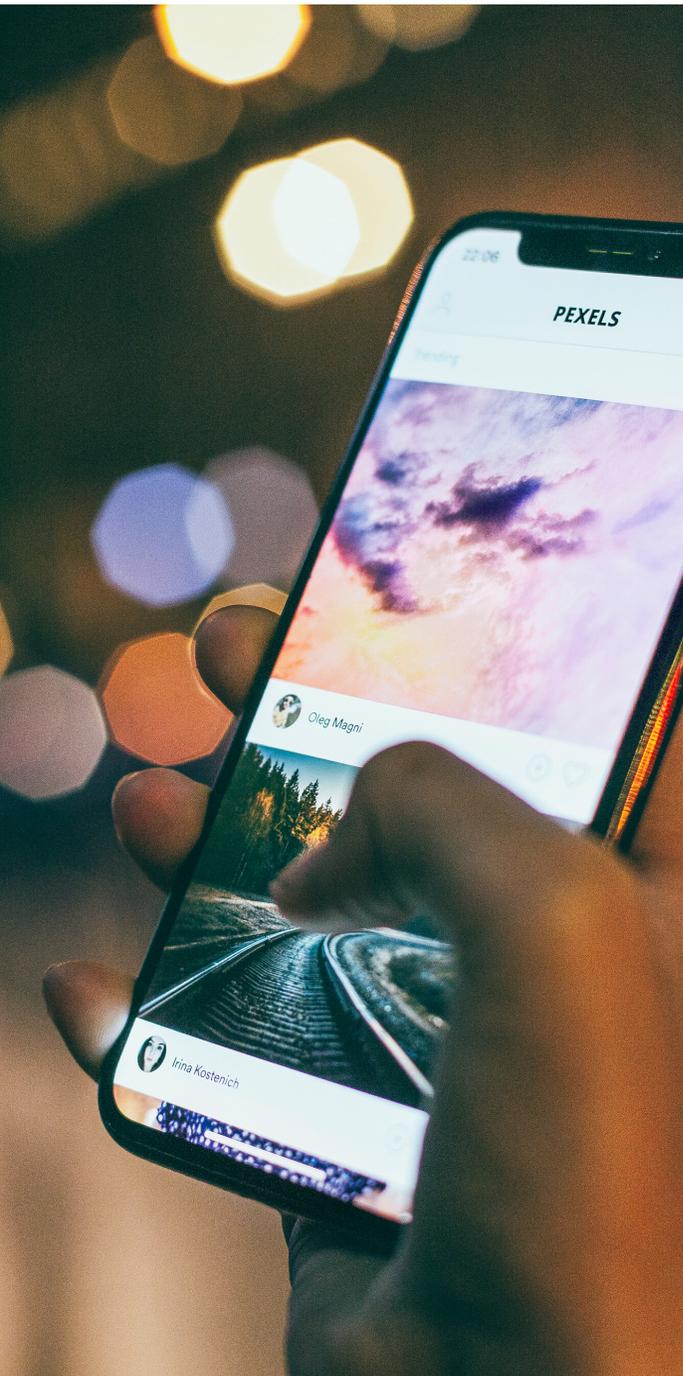


# Opening the Dialogue: Helping Youth Stay Safe Online

for parents, caregivers, and mentors of adolescent youth

With children spending more time at home due to COVID-19 and summer upon us, our children may be spending more time online. There are a variety of approaches to keeping kids safe online, and no matter what strategy works best for the young people in your life, these considerations will help you reflect on how to implement online safety strategies in ways that strengthen relationships and build trust.



## Don't silence... Keep communication open!

It can be scary to think that our children might encounter harmful material online or be exploited, but children who have adults they can trust with their questions and fears are better supported to recognize harm when they see it and make better choices to keep themselves safe. As you are thinking through your approach to online safety, ask: How does this approach build trust? Does this approach keep communication open, or shut communication down? What am I doing to help children know they can share their concerns with me, and that I am on their side?

## Don't shame... Empower!

Shaming and blaming don't empower youth to learn how to take care of themselves or think critically about how they behave online. Shame and blame often lead people deeper into secrecy. Instead, empower youth with real strategies about how to think through safety and options. In talking through options, they can learn how to evaluate communications and safety. Remember that they are going to make mistakes, and that mistakes are learning opportunities. Practice saying things like, "What do you think about that?" or "What do you think might help in this situation?" Be careful to avoid inadvertent victim blaming in your words. No child ever deserves to be blamed for harm enacted against them, even if they make youthful or impulsive choices!

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## **Don't avoid... Have the tough conversations!**

As much as we'd all hope that bad things don't happen to young people, online or in their homes or communities, we know that they do. As much as we'd like to pretend that children aren't curious about sex and relationships, we know that they are! We can't educate children about online safety without being willing to talk openly, in age-appropriate ways about sex, relationships, consent, and harm. Share your values and beliefs as you share factual, shame-free information. Lean into the discomfort of fumbling through tough conversations. None of us are perfect at this, and most of us didn't have good models for this kind of open conversation, but we get better the more we practice!

## **Don't talk over... Listen!**

No matter how well we think we remember what it was like to be young, it's important to spend time listening to the young people in our lives about their experiences, beliefs, thoughts, dreams, fears, and solutions. Feeling heard builds trust. Trust opens communication. Open communication builds safety. Practice active listening skills, listening without judgment or shame, and asking occasional and gentle clarifying questions when needed. Let children know you are interested in their lives, and that you believe in their brilliance.

## **Honor Kids' Unique Needs and Ways of Coping**

In discussions about online safety, remember the needs of children who may be experiencing marginalization in their families, schools, and communities. For a child who has experienced bullying, messages like "these people online aren't your friends" may fall flat, as that child might not feel like the kids in their schools are their friends either. For a child who is (or whose family is) without strong social networks, finding support where they can find it (including online) is adaptive and natural. It's important to celebrate that creative effort to meet natural human needs for connection even as we help young people remember how to do so more safely.

It's also important to look at our schools, communities, and society to see what needs are not being met that youth are trying to get met online, and advocate for community and society change accordingly. Remember to recognize and be respectful of cultural differences in parenting styles. Safety conversations in families whose children experience racism or xenophobia may look different from conversations in families who do not.

## **Prevention means we also teach how to avoid causing harm!**

In the world of violence prevention, "primary prevention" means the strategies we use to keep sexual violence from ever happening in the first place. This means that we shift our focus to preventing harm-doers and potential harm-doers from ever causing harm. In addition to teaching our young people how to recognize signs they might be in a dangerous situation online, we can teach them how to behave with integrity and compassion online. We can teach them how to respect other people's privacy and boundaries. We can avoid any kind of messaging that suggests it's okay to control or humiliate the people they love. We can teach them about consent. This not only helps them avoid causing inadvertent harm now, while they are young and still learning who they are -- it lays the foundation to prevent causing harm in the future, when they are adults.

*Thank you to prevention staff at our member agencies whose brilliance informed this document, and to the young people who improved it with their insights and wisdom.*