# Recommendations from Young Canadians in a Wireless World Phase IV

Young Canadians in a Wireless World (YCWW) is Canada's longest-running and most comprehensive research study on young people's attitudes, behaviours, and opinions regarding the internet, technology, and digital media. Phase IV of YCWW was conducted between 2019 and 2023 and culminates in a final *trends and recommendations report*. We have listed the recommendations stemming from this research below and organized them according to the themed reports for this phase: (1) life online; (2) encountering harmful and discomforting content online; (3) online privacy and consent; (4) online meanness and cruelty; (5) sexting; and (6) digital media literacy.

Life Online

- Sustained efforts should be made to close the digital divide in Canada, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing shift of many services, supports, resources, and programs to online spaces and digital platforms.

- Ongoing development and delivery of digital media literacy education should be supported, particularly that which centres critical thinking skills regarding making and sharing content on social media platforms.

- Additional support and resources should be provided for parents, guardians, and caregivers to recognize and address the increased presence of younger children (especially those under 13) on social media apps, platforms, and websites.

- The conversation about young people and smartphones should be reframed to recognize that rather than asking for one, most youth were given one by their parents or guardians out of necessity—to stay in touch.

- Resources should be developed and promoted to support parents, guardians, and caregivers as they decide when and how to give children and youth devices. Specifically, they should address any potential alternative modes of communication and connection for younger children who might not be ready for a smartphone (or connected device).

- Ongoing development and promotion of resources to support parents, guardians, and caregivers should be supported as they navigate screen time and device use with young people. Specifically, resources on the risks and challenges that come with using devices in the hour before bed or after a young person has gone to bed for the night. Resources should highlight the importance of non-technological approaches to managing screen time —including the co-creation of rules and boundaries — and the necessity of building trust.

- Continued development and promotion of digital well-being resources for youth should be supported, with a focus on better managing their time, focus, and energy online.

- Because risky and positive online activities are correlated with one another, the conversation around online safety should be reframed from limiting risk to maximizing opportunity and participation while managing and mitigating risks.

- Platforms and technology companies should consider the quality of online experiences and content offered to young people, especially as it impacts their sense of well-being, safety, and equitable inclusion in online communities.

- Policymakers should review regulations around online gambling in Canada, especially as it pertains to youth. This is particularly important given the increase in advertising for sports gambling in 2023.

- Research should be conducted to understand the impact of the pandemic on screen time. Specifically, qualitative research with parents/guardians and caregivers to gauge their understanding of and response to the Canadian Pediatric Society recommendations.

- Research should be conducted to better understand the impacts of online learning, especially with the increased turn to learning management systems (such as Google Classroom, Brightspace, and Blackboard), on educators' and students' privacy and data collection, learning loss, mental health, and their social and emotional experiences with learning online.

- Research, specifically qualitative focus groups and interviews with school boards, should be conducted to better understand how school boards and districts across the country are navigating and developing policies to address the increased reliance on the internet and digital technology in classrooms.

- Research should be conducted to better understand how youth find and create communities in online spaces—specifically among groups like LGBTQ+ youth, racialized youth, and youth with disabilities.
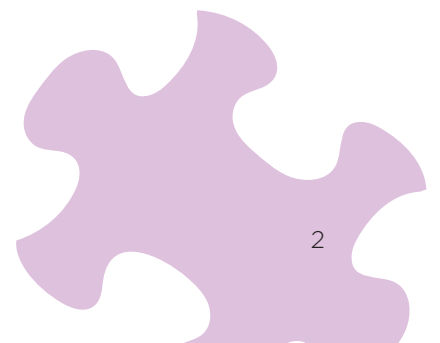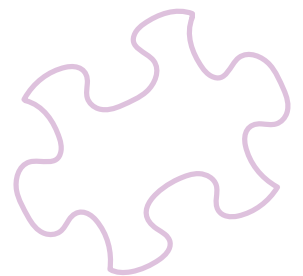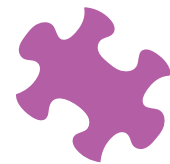
Encountering Harmful and Discomforting Content Online

- Youth feel that platforms and technology companies should address the quality of online experiences and content offered to youth, especially given the regularity with which they encounter harmful and discomforting content. Specifically, youth want to see more accessible and transparent reporting functions on platforms, apps, and websites.

- Platforms and technology companies need to do more to combat racist and sexist content, especially since racialized youth and LGBTQ+ youth report seeing this content more frequently than other groups. Specifically, youth called for platforms to 'take down' this content.

- Platforms and technology companies need to do more to address the pornographic content that youth are unintentionally coming across when they engage online. Age-gating tools may be of limited effectiveness since youth are more likely to unintentionally encounter this content in their 'everyday' uses of the internet.

- Policymakers ought to consider increased consequences for platforms, websites, and apps that do not prioritize the safety and well-being of users. Any regulations enacted should make clear that online businesses and corporations are responsible for flagging harmful content and addressing online hate and harassment. Specifically, youth want more transparency and clear and accessible communication regarding *how* governments and platforms are working to keep users safe online.

- Policymakers ought to consider the unique needs of young Canadians in developing and adapting regulations (policies and practices) that address online harms. The needs of equity-deserving groups including girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and racialized youth ought to be at the forefront of any policy development.

- Ongoing development and delivery of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that help in limiting, responding to and navigating harmful and discomforting content online should be supported.

- Ongoing promotion and uptake of educational resources like *My Voice is Louder Than Hate* that support youth in recognizing and responding to online hate (especially racist and sexist content) in safe and respectful ways should be supported.

- Future research projects should be expanded to include perspectives from younger youth when it comes to encountering racist, sexist, and other harmful or discomforting content online.

- Additional qualitative research should be conducted to better understand the experiences of young Canadians—especially gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities—and their sense of safety and well-being in online spaces.
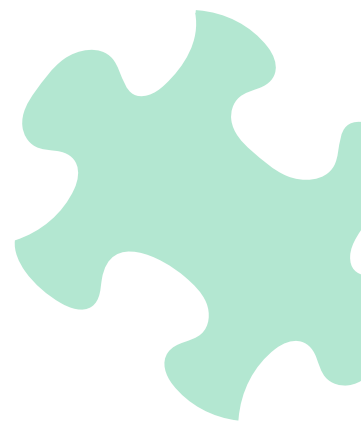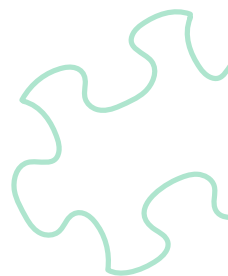
Online Privacy and Consent

- Support ongoing development and delivery of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that help young Canadians understand how personal information is collected, used, and shared by online corporations.

- Support ongoing development and delivery of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that help young Canadians better understand privacy settings, platform defaults, and terms of service and privacy policies. (Specifically, resources that communicate the importance of data privacy as well as interpersonal privacy.)

- Support ongoing development and resources for parents, guardians, and caregivers that emphasize co-creating household rules related to sharing personal information online.

- Communicate with parents, guardians, and caregivers the importance of *relational supervision*—over surveillance and control—which is positively correlated to building the trust needed for young people to feel safe and supported, resulting in greater uptake of privacy settings, features, practices, and awareness amongst youth.

- Work with school boards and Ministries of Education to better understand and navigate the privacy impacts of the increased reliance on technology and online learning management systems in classrooms. Specifically, conduct a qualitative needs assessment both for students and educators with an emphasis on how this increased reliance on technology and online learning systems potentially impacts trust between them.

- Continue to communicate and mobilize [recommendations from MediaSmarts' qualitative research on privacy and consent,](#) specifically those that call on online platforms and policymakers to consider the unique needs of young people in developing meaningful online consent policies and practices.

- Policymakers ought to consider increased consequences for platforms, websites, and apps that do not prioritize the privacy and data protection of children and youth. Any regulations enacted ought to make clear that platforms have a responsibility to clearly communicate, in ways that children and youth can understand, how their data is used—especially if it is shared with third parties.

- This and past MediaSmarts research suggests that youth support increased uptake by policymakers and technology companies of 'right to erasure' or 'right to be forgotten' policies that respect young people's requests to fully delete content and data about them from apps, platforms, and websites.

- Platforms and technology companies need to do more to make privacy policies and terms of service agreements easier to read and understand. Consider designing child-friendly terms of service and/or privacy policies in consultation with youth.

- Platforms and technology companies ought to consider privacy-by-design practices for children and youth, including the use of privacy defaults that implement the highest privacy standards and data protection, as well as greater user control and increased options for audience settings.

- Additional research should be conducted to understand how (in what contexts and for what purposes) young Canadians navigate privacy and manage their identities online—mainly when using fake or anonymous accounts on specific platforms.

- Further qualitative research should be conducted examining young Canadians ongoing concerns about corporate surveillance, data collection, and data sharing in the classroom.
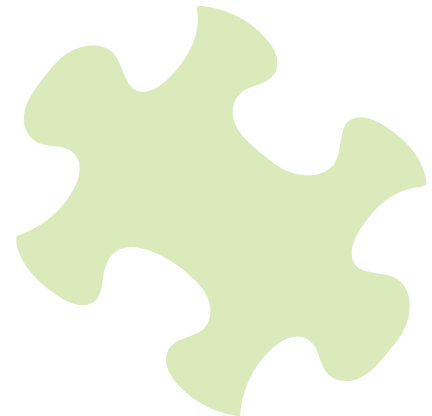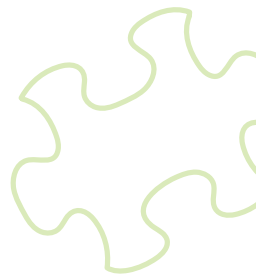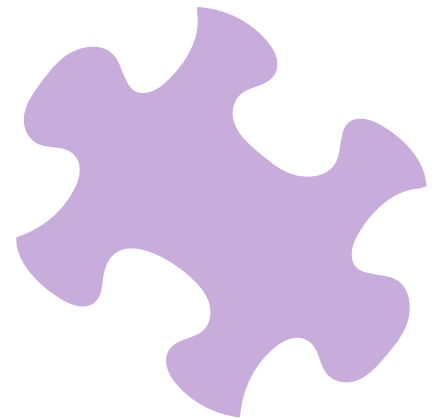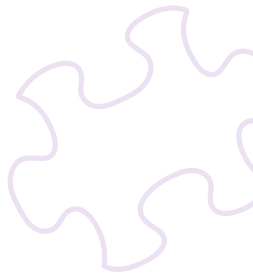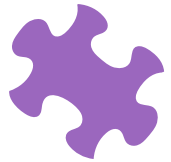
Online Meanness and Cruelty

- Support ongoing development and delivery of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that help young Canadians navigate experiences of online meanness and cruelty. Specifically, resources should be developed that acknowledge and emphasize the complex intersections of experiences, engagements, and responses to online meanness and cruelty.

- Support development and promotion of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that address the primary online contexts in which youth experience online meanness and cruelty: online gaming, texts and private messages, and social media posts and comment threads. Resources should reject victim-blaming approaches such as suggesting youth stop engaging in these spaces.

- Support development and promotion of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that address the primary motivations for engaging in online meanness and cruelty: name-calling, as a joke, and in retaliation to their own experience of online meanness.

- Support development and promotion of resources for helping youth respond to online meanness and cruelty. These resources should embrace the interpersonal or relational approaches preferred by youth and encourage youth (especially LGBTQ+, trans and gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, and youth with disabilities) to safely advocate for themselves and their sense of safety and well-being in online communities.

- Communicate and mobilize findings about online meanness and cruelty with community organizations that support LGBTQ+, trans and gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, and youth with a disability.

- Communicate with parents, guardians, and caregivers the value of *relational supervision* over surveillance and control, emphasizing how supportive adult involvement (e.g., the co-creation of household rules) can decrease the likelihood that young people will experience or engage in online meanness and cruelty.

- Work with school boards and Ministries of Education to revise and adapt 'bullying' policies to reflect the complexity of this behaviour, overlapping experiences, and various forms of engagement. Reinforce that students find school rules helpful, but schools and school boards ought to consider reframing policies and practices to focus on social-emotional learning, managing online conflict, and promoting positive social norms (such as publicizing the relatively low rates of online conflict among youth.)
Conduct research, specifically qualitative discussions with youth, to better understand why and in which circumstances they ignore or disengage with online meanness and cruelty.

- Conduct additional research to better understand the experiences of youth who report higher incidents and frequency of online meanness and cruelty—for example, LGBTQ+ youth, trans and gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, and youth with a disability.
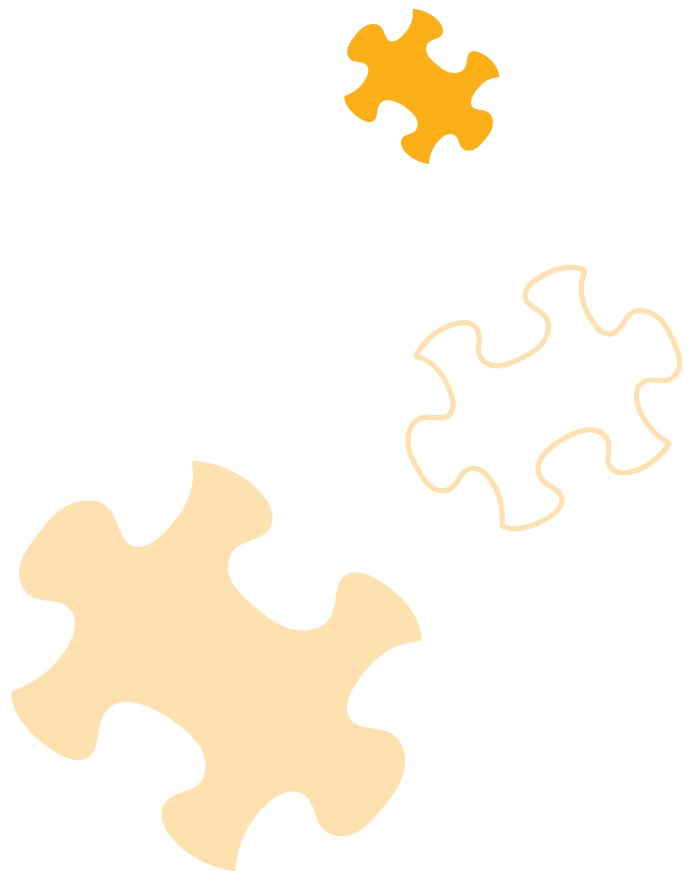
Sexting

- Reframe the conversation about young people and sexting to recognize the overall low rates of sexting behaviour, that sexting is most likely to occur within a romantic relationship or to develop intimacy with a romantic partner, and the complex intersection of sexting behaviours.

- Develop and incorporate materials on healthy online relationships into sexual education curriculum and resources for youth, parents, guardians, and caregivers.

- Support ongoing development and delivery of resources to help youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators navigate conversations about sexting. Specifically, resources ought to differentiate between consensual and non-consensual sexting; avoid victim-blaming; confront gender stereotyping and moral disengagement; and focus on the harm that is possible when sexts are shared without the original sender's consent.

- Sexting resources for youth need to remain connected to young people's experiences and lead from a place of non-judgmental support. Specifically, resources ought to avoid overreaction, victim blaming and shaming, and criminalization which reduces trust and decreases the likelihood that young people will seek adult support. Work with community justice and youth-serving organizations to investigate non-legal resources and responses to non-consensual sexting. Conduct additional research to better understand the associated risks and protective factors for sexting behaviours among young Canadians, including demographics that may be unequally impacted by potential risks.

- Research, specifically qualitative discussions with youth, should be conducted to better understand their motivations for engaging in sexting behaviours (especially forwarding sexts). Research is needed to examine whether moral disengagement mechanisms (including double-standards and stereotypes) remain motivating factors for youth or whether new factors are at play.

Digital Media Literacy

- Support ongoing development and delivery of comprehensive digital media literacy resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators in schools, communities, and homes across Canada.

- Work with Ministries of Education to integrate holistic digital media literacy curriculum for K-12 students across Canada. This must include greater resources and support for teachers (such as MediaSmarts' lesson plans, Civix CTRL-F program, AML lessons, and ACTUA's coding program among others) as well as increased access to devices, technology, and technical support in the classroom.

- Continue to grow MediaSmarts' Teacher's Champion program.

- Continue to increase the number of collaborators who participate in Media Literacy Week and Digital Citizen Day.

- Ongoing development and promotion of resources for educators on media-making in the classroom.

- Support ongoing development and promotion of authentication and verification resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators. Specifically, resources are needed to address verification practices on social platforms as well as how search engines operate and are impacted by corporate business models.

- Support ongoing development and promotion of resources for younger Canadians on determining the reliability of information.

- Ongoing development and promotion of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that empower young Canadians to engage as active and informed digital citizens.

- Reframe the conversation about young people and their technical skills to recognize that youth are not de facto experts—even if they appear to 'take-up' technology with ease. Communicate with parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that young people consider *them* to be trusted sources of expert advice and support.

- Support ongoing communication and promotion of best practices in authenticating and verifying information online, specifically; the need to shift from outdated close reading strategies to more effective lateral readings strategies.

- Continue to advocate with policymakers and government officials for a national digital media literacy strategy for Canada, including the development of a [framework](#) and measurable benchmarks.

- Increase long-term and sustained government funding and resources to support digital media literacy education both in schools and communities.

- Enable better coordination and collaboration between digital media literacy organizations across Canada that results in more robust development and effective delivery of education and programming. Engage policymakers and platforms in conversations about the responsibilities of technology companies for fostering safer and healthier spaces online with the goal of bolstering ethical and responsible digital citizenship.

- Conduct research that examines the potential impacts of artificial intelligence-driven search tools—like Chat GPT—on young people's authentication and verification skills and practices. As well as the potential for young people to form parasocial relationships with the chatbots behind these search tools and whether this parasocial relationship impacts their authentication and verification practices.

- Additional research should also be conducted to learn more about how youth encounter, identify, and navigate misinformation and disinformation online.

- Conduct research, specifically qualitative discussions with youth, to better understand how they conceive of digital citizenship and positive online participation and how they engage in online activism and advocacy.