MEDIA SAFETY TIPS: EARLY CHILDHOOD (BIRTH TO 5 YEARS OLD)

Kids change more during this period than any other time. For the first two years, their world is all about interacting with parents and physically exploring the world around them. By age three, they begin to understand general rules about the world and their own identities and are constantly curious about these. They also do a lot of pretend play where they "try on" different roles, including those of their parents and other adults they know.

Media risks

The risks that kids encounter in media fall into four categories:

Content risks, where kids are exposed to or engage with harmful content such as violence, hate, or sexualized media

Conduct risks that come from what kids do or how they interact with other users

Consumer risks related to money, advertising, and data collection

And risks that come from being **Contact**ed by other people.

CONTENT

Children under two have little or no understanding of the separation between media and reality. By **age three** they can recognize ads as a type of content but don't yet understand why the fact that something is an ad should make them more skeptical.

Between two and five children start to compare media representations and their own lives and to answer questions about media. By around three or four, they will be able to draw on some obvious features of media works. By age six they should be able to think about who made a media work, but not yet analyze their choices in making it.

They are most likely to be frightened by things that have a scary appearance or characters who are in danger. They don't understand conventions like dream sequences and take each moment in media in isolation. Seeing a character in danger will be just as frightening if the character is rescued later, and a scary character will not be less scary if they are shown as being silly or unthreatening later. Visual realism doesn't affect how likely they are to be scared: they are just as scared of animation or computer graphics as film.

CONDUCT

As they reach **age 3-5**, kids begin to learn rules and social norms. They become more and more able to use technology independently, especially touchscreen or voice-operated devices. They begin to use devices more independently over these years, but are still too young to manage their own time.

By the end of this period they should be able to understand that while we can't always control our feelings, we can control how we react to them. Parents and siblings are still the main influence, rather than peers.

CONTACT

Children recognize people they know offline are the same people when seen online. This has positive elements: for instance, it means that a video-chat with a grandparent will have some benefit for a child under two. It also means that they will likely not recognize that it may be inappropriate for other people they know offline to suggest talking privately online.

CONSUMER

At this age children don't recognize the networked nature of the internet. They see apps and websites as unconnected tools, and don't understand that apps may be tracking what they do or sharing data about them with others. They are likely to see characters in apps or videos as being real and will respond if those characters ask them to keep playing or buy things.

Safety tips

There are four main strategies to help kids become resilient to online risks. We can:

Curate our kids' media experiences; **Control** who can access our kids and their data; **Co-view** media with our kids; and be our kids' media **Coaches**.

CONTROL

Develop good habits around "sharenting."

Be aware of data collection of smart devices and tracking apps (this can start before birth with pregnancy tracking apps).

CURATE

Avoid screen media as much as possible for the **first two years**, including "educational" media. If kids under two do watch or use screen media, follow it up by

talking about the content with them or by reading a book, singing a song, playing a "make-believe" game, or otherwise engaging them on the same subject.

- Don't use screens to comfort kids or regulate their emotions

- Model self-regulation through saying things like "That was fun, let's do something else now"

- Use tools like timers to limit sessions

- Find and select media for their needs

- Avoid advertising and influencer content

For kids aged **3-5**, you can make child accounts on streaming services like Netflix or YouTube and subscribe to good quality channels like Sesame Street or CBC Kids on YouTube. Some sites also let you make playlists of videos for your kids to watch.

CO-VIEW

Coviewing with young children **(ages 3-5)** can be a very positive experience. One study found that for first-grade children, a moderate amount of media use was associated with the most gains in language – so long as they were co-viewing that media with a parent.

Co-viewing at this age has three primary elements:

- Identifying what they're seeing or experiencing

- Defining unfamiliar words and concepts

- Making connections with their experience

When reading books, listening to music, or attending live performance, encourage small children to ask questions and to share their opinions and reactions. Choose media that allow them to identify familiar things such as children, cars, pets, and so on.

You can ask them questions that prompt media literacy thinking like:

- "Who is telling the story? Are they the same as the person who wrote the story?"
- "How does this story make you feel?"
- "Is this real or made up? How do you know?"

Look for books that highlight digital media literacy concepts, like *Chester* by Melanie Watt, *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch and *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by John Scieszka and Lane Smith. Call out and counter stereotyping when you encounter it in media, including books. You can show them how families on TV or in books do – and don't – resemble your family or their friends' families

While e-books are better than no books at all, the preference should still be for physical books: "chewing a book is the child's first interaction with it. Eventually, there will be interest in the pictures and the words."

It's more useful to teach children to *recognize* advertising than to try to decode it. They don't yet understand that ads are less trustworthy because they're trying to sell you something, but they can learn to tell the difference between things that are ads and things that aren't.

Physical reassurance like snuggling or hand-holding, is the most effective way of helping kids this age who have seen frightening or disturbing content.

COACH

Model good tech use, including strategies for managing conflict online. This includes helping kids recognize and name their feelings. (This is important at every age, but especially with very young children.) They are actually more likely than older children to change how they behave in response to changes in how risky something is seen as being. That means that if you tell them a safe and a risky way of doing something they will choose the safer one.

Model positive gender roles. Kids who believe in traditional gender stereotypes are more likely to engage in harmful and dangerous behaviour throughout their childhood and adolescence. One of the biggest influences on how kids think about gender is whether they've seen a male parent doing housework like cooking or cleaning.

Make household rules that include the different times and reasons different media tools are allowed. Encourage creative play with digital toys.

Additional Resources

Co-Viewing With Your Kids

Dealing with Fear and Media

Family Guidelines for New Tech Devices

Four Tips for Managing Your Kids' Screen Time

Helping Young Kids Get a Healthy Start with Devices

Talking to Kids About Advertising

Talking to Kids About Gender Stereotypes

Understanding the Rating Systems

Using Parental Controls