TIP SHEET

MEDIA SAFETY TIPS: TEENS

While they're not going through as much development as tweens, moving to high school at the beginning of this stage – and moving out of it at the end – can be stressful.

Two important ideas relating to teens are the *imaginary audience* and the *personal fable*. The imaginary audience makes them overestimate how much attention other people are paying to them. This makes them more self-conscious and leads them to think of privacy primarily in terms of *impression management* – trying to control how others see them. The personal fable makes teens see themselves as the main character of a story and, as a result, leads many to believe that bad things will simply not happen to them.

Teens are conscious of "real world" issues and are typically interested in helping to find solutions. They enjoy becoming competent in adult activities and demonstrating their skills.

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

Teens engage more actively with media than younger children. They have a wider variety of activities and choose from a wider variety of media works, and are more likely to select media for themselves based on their own needs. At the same time, individual media choices are more significant to teens' identities than they are for younger children.

Jane Brown's *Media Practice Model* suggests there is a cycle in which teens' own preferences and identities lead them to select and interact with particular media works. They then *apply* these media works to their views of themselves and the world, possibly copying or rejecting what they have seen. This leads to a further development of their identity, which further prompts selection of media works, and so on.

Social media **has the biggest impact on boys' happiness at the beginning (14-15) and end (19)** of this period. It has less of an effect on girls at the beginning and middle, but its impact rises again at 19.

Gender role identity is particularly influenced by media at this age. While they are not passive recipients of media messages, they do often draw on media for sexual or romantic "scripts" to follow. This can include unhealthy romantic scripts (like possessiveness) or sexual scripts drawn from explicit media, including pornography.

They're most likely to seek out mental health information and support at this age. They may look

for content related to risky behaviour (drugs, tobacco, eating disorders, etc.) and may also have this content recommended to them by algorithms.

CONDUCT

Teens are not necessarily more likely to take risks that younger kids: They are exposed to more risks and are more influenced by peers than younger children. Labeling them as "stereotypical risk takers," though, can actually make them more likely to take risks. They're more confident in their identity than tweens, but as a result they may be more influenced by the groups or subcultures they've found a place in.

At this age they are starting to become aware of how the design of media tools affects how they use them, and the ways in which they can create difficulties in communication. They are very sensitive to the social signals sent by different app features (following, Liking, etc.). They develop strong social norms around their use and often feel obligations to friends and peers in relation to them. This can get in the way of getting enough sleep, as teens often feel they have to be available at all times to support or respond to their friends.

CONTACT

Teens' peer groups are mostly settled and they are more influenced by their peers than adults. Kids who are shy or less confident may start to prefer spending time with people online rather than offline.

Many are starting to form romantic relationships, which can create a new set of challenges. They have learn appropriate boundaries when it comes to trust and privacy.

Kids this age are most likely to have met someone face-to-face that they first met on the internet (one in five have done so, compared to one in ten tweens and just one in twenty children under 11.) In most cases youth say this is a positive experience for them, but when it goes badly it can be very dangerous.

CONSUMER

Even well into the teen years, children still usually have a poor understanding of corporate data collection and its implications, as well as the long "shadow" that their online presence may cast. They focus on controlling *known* audiences (parents, friends, etc.) but generally don't know what information about them apps and websites collect themselves, how long they store it, or what they can do with it.

They're highly vulnerable to influencer marketing at this age. They may not realize how much the ads they see are influenced by their data profile.

Many teens are also exposed to gambling ads at this age but don't understand the risks and costs of gambling.

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**.

CURATE

Filters don't work well at this age unless teens have been involved in setting them up. Almost half of teens take steps to avoid seeing pornography or other inappropriate content online, so it's still useful to show them how to use filters themselves and to use search terms and content settings (for instance Restricted Mode on YouTube or TikTok). Make sure they know about good quality sources of information on healthy sexuality like SexandU (a resource provided by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada) and CBC's About Sex. This is also the period where kids are likely to experience mental health issues, so make sure they know about mental health resources like Mind Your Mind and counselling services like Kids Help Phone.

Many social networks provide a safer experience for young teens by default, so it's important to make sure that kids give their correct age when they register. You can also help teen learn how to get out of a "rabbit hole" of unhealthy content by making recommendation algorithms, like YouTube's Up Next bar and TikTok's For You page, forget what they know about you and training it to show you more healthful content.

You can also help them to opt out of having devices in their bedrooms at night: because they often feel obligated to stay in contact with their friends, they may appreciate it if you play the bad guy. If you ever change the rules about when devices are allowed, or take a device away as a consequence of their behaviour, **give them a chance to let their friends know** so others don't think they are "ghosting" them.

CONTROL

Review the privacy and data collection settings on their devices and apps. Remind them to do this any time they get a new device or download a new app. If they have an iPhone, go to Privacy settings, then Privacy & Security, then Tracking, and switch "Allow Apps to Request to Track" to Off. On an Android phone, download the DuckDuckGo app and turn on App Tracking Protection. Show your kids how to do this and explore together how you can limit data collection on other apps, browsers and websites.

Help them think about how they want future audiences to see them and start to build an "online resume" that highlights their hobbies, volunteer work, creativity, and so on.

CO-VIEW

Though their independence is increasing, teens are more likely than parents to say they're interested in shared online experiences!

Teens get a lot of their ideas about what relationships are supposed to be like from media. Make sure you're aware of what they're watching, playing and listening to and be ready to talk about ways that they depict romantic relationships and gender stereotypes. Kids who see either physically or psychologically abusive relationships in media are more likely to be abusive towards their partners. Talk to your kids about media portrayals of relationships and about gender stereotypes. Talking about gender roles can help youth to resist pressure from their partners and peers to do things like sending sexual photos to their partner or sharing them with their friends.

Kids this age often start to watch horror movies and other disturbing content on purpose, and are also likely to see upsetting material without looking for it. The more they understand about how media are made, are better able to deal with the experience, but they also need to know they can still come to you if they see something that makes them upset.

COACH

Teens need to learn how to judge risk and to recognize factors that make them more likely to engage in risky behaviour. Don't start with the assumption that all teens are risk-takers or are unable to make good decisions: this can affect how they see themselves and lead them to take more risks than they would have otherwise. If they know a safe way to do something they want to do, teens will usually prefer that to a riskier way.

Don't assume that kids don't need guidance once they're in their older teens! The end of the teen years is when social media has the most impact on kids' happiness. This may be because it is another period of increased independence, or because there are often big changes in their offline social networks. This is also the period where they are most likely to want to make a positive difference online, so ask them how their favourite influencers or YouTubers have made a difference online (or offline). Talk about what things are seen as normal, or are rewarded, in their online spaces. Do they agree with them? If not, what can they do to change them?

Even in the teen years, household rules still make a difference in how kids behave online. These rules should be less about specific routines and procedures and focus more on values and general principles like "be kind to other people online" and "think twice before sharing a photo with anyone." It's also important to watch out for the "over-correct": relaxing rules and then, after something goes wrong, putting in stricter ones. This will increase conflict with kids and make them less likely to respect the rules.

Teens are likely to overestimate both the risks *and* the possible benefits of any action. They also overestimate how many of their peers are doing the same thing. When talking to them about risk, focus on consequences that seem probable and directly relevant. British neuroscientist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore gives as an example warning teens that smoking "give[s] you bad breath, or put[s] younger children in danger." As they feel strongly about their newfound independence they "also respond to the idea that this is an adult industry that is exploiting them to make money."

Make sure that teens understand what makes for a healthy and unhealthy relationship and the importance of not feeling pressured into doing things they don't want to do – such as taking explicit pictures of themselves. Tell them that there is never any excuse for sharing an intimate or embarrassing photo or video without permission from the person in it.

Talk to them about why adults having sex or forming romantic relationships with underage adolescents is wrong and make sure they understand that online predators are often not "strangers," but people they already know who will use digital tools to communicate privately with them. Help them recognize the "red flags" that suggest someone online

– whether it's a person they met online or someone they already know offline – may be grooming them for a sexual relationship:

- flattering them, especially about how they look
- asking about times and places where they could meet or could communicate online in private
- introducing sex or sexual topics into the conversation
- sharing or offering to share sexual images, either pornography or pictures of the sender
- asking them not to tell their parents or friends about a conversation or about the relationship.

You can give them some ways to leave a conversation quickly if any of they see any of those, like telling the person that you're calling them. It's also important that they know to tell you if an adult they know offline asks to contact them in a private online space, and to never meet up with someone they've met online without telling you first.

Teens are incredibly conscious of hypocrisy, so it's as important as ever to make sure that your media use is setting a good example or them.

Additional Resources

FOR PARENTS

Break the Fake: Critical Thinking vs. Disinformation

Break the Fake: How to Tell What's True Online

Building Your Brand: Establishing a Positive Presence Online

Communicating Safely Online

Co-Viewing With Your Kids

Dealing with Fear and Media

Family Guidelines for New Tech Devices

Protecting Your Privacy on Commercial Apps and Websites

Talking to Kids About Casual Prejudice Online

Talking to Kids About Gender Stereotypes

Talking to Kids About Hate Online

Talking to Your Kids About Pornography

Talking to Your Kids About Sexting

FOR TEENS

Communicating Safely Online

Dealing with Digital Stress

Digital Citizenship: Ethics and Privacy

Digital Citizenship: Using Technology for Good

What Should I Do If Someone Sends Me a Sext?