

## MEDIA SAFETY TIPS: TWEENS (10-13 YEARS OLD)

Two big changes happen at this age: the beginning of adolescence and (for most kids) starting to use phones and social media. While younger kids use digital tech, for tweens it is often an essential part of how they develop and grow. They are aware of online risks like privacy invasions and stranger contact but more often in the abstract sense, having been told of them by teachers or parents instead of peers. This often leads to a disconnect between how risky they think things are and what they actually do.

### 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 **Contacted** by other people.

### CONTENT

Many kids this age begin using platforms designed for older teens or adults: more than half have a TikTok or Instagram account, and four in ten have a Snapchat account.

At the beginning of this stage, children are often becoming more interested in the wider world and may use media to learn about current issue or events. A third use the internet to access news, though hobbies (67%) and entertainment or celebrities (53%) are still more popular topics.

Because they are still building their general knowledge, kids this age often have more knowledge than they're able to interpret. They are more likely to see misleading content than any other age group: 59% say they see it every day. They are learning to be skeptical of what they see online, but are still learning how to judge whether it's reliable or not. They're also more likely to encounter racism, sexism and other forms of hate content.

Many tweens will start to seek out information about sex, but they may not know how to find reliable information or how to avoid seeing inappropriate content. Just one in ten intentionally look for pornography at this age, but a quarter have seen it without looking for it. This happens most often (64% of the time) when it pops up on websites, but it may also show up as a result of search engines (34%), on social networks (19%) because friends share it or on video sites (18% for both).

Gender representation and body image are key issues at this age, which may explain **why this is one of the periods where social media has the biggest impact on girls' happiness**. (The end of the teen years is the other.) This is the age where there is the biggest gap between their images of themselves and the images they feel they should present online. In particular, they feel pressure to make themselves and their lives seem

“picture perfect” at all times. They are more and more aware of the difference between the idealized images they see in media and their own reality, but do not generally have strategies to resolve this conflict in a healthy way.

They’re more afraid of realistic dangers than younger children and are more likely to intentionally watch scary or “gross out” content, which may be beyond what they’re able to handle.

## CONDUCT

Kids this age are becoming more independent and pushing for more freedom, but still need support in managing their time and balancing screen use with other activities.

While they are becoming more independent from parents, this is actually the age where kids are most influenced by peers and “super peers” – influencers, celebrities, friends-of-friends and so on. They’re prone to take risks as a way of testing boundaries and gain status among their peers, but at this age it’s hard for them to think clearly about the possible consequences of what they do online. At the same time, they are also starting to look for ways to make a positive difference both offline and online.

They are still learning how to manage online conflict and deal with the limitations of online communication. As they reach this age they often move from communicating mostly with one person at a time, through platforms with voice and video, to things like social media or group texts where they are talking to larger audiences with fewer clues about how a message should be interpreted. This can lead to unintentional conflict or “drama” as what they post and read is misinterpreted.

“Drama” is more common than intentional cyberbullying: just a quarter of kids this age have been targets of mean and cruel behaviour online, fewer than kids in middle childhood and older teens. When it does happen, they’re less likely than younger kids to turn to parents or guardians (one in five would do this) and more likely to pretend they’re not bothered by it (one in four). When they do cyberbully others, they are likely to do it to get back at someone (four in ten of those who cyberbullied others said this was the reason), to get revenge on a friend’s behalf (one in five), to “get even” for something else (just under a third) or to join in because their friends are doing it (one in four).

This is the age where kids’ attitudes towards sharing sexts become fixed. While very few kids this age have sent (8%) or received (13%) a sext, starting at this age about a third of kids who did receive a sext went on to share that sext with others.

At this stage children are very conscious of the need to create a specific digital image, carefully choosing (and sometimes editing) photos to that effect. Over a third say they only post things they’re sure won’t offend or upset other people, and almost as many say that others expect them to only post positive things online.

Kids rely heavily on peer feedback at this age. Though they are aware of the artificiality of acting this way, they are more likely to use alternate or private accounts (“finstas”) for a more authentic experience instead of using their main accounts in more authentic ways.

Youth at this stage are also vulnerable to excessive use as their growing social needs, along with expectations of keeping in touch with parents while being more

physically independent, happen at the same time as they start using media tools like social media that are designed to keep users engaged.

## CONTACT

Kids this age often use many different tools to keep in touch with friends and family, including games, social networks and messaging apps. This means more different ways that people they don't know can contact them, and blocking strangers or "randos" becomes a necessary chore.

At this age kids are mostly focused on friend and peer circles. Only towards the end of the period become do they become interested in connecting to broader communities, except for online games and celebrities on social media. They may become interested in subcultures and start exploring online communities organized around personal interests like art or coding, or around particular parts of their identities. This is generally healthy but may sometimes lead to contact with people they don't know offline. Online communities based on shared interests, like forums or wikis, give them a chance to develop their identity and to build their skills or knowledge beyond what is possible with offline peers.

They may take steps to limit who can see what they post online, but aren't yet thinking about possible future audiences like employers.

Kids this age are less likely than older teens to have been sent a sext from someone they only know online, but *much* more likely have gotten one from a total stranger (four in ten kids who had received a sext said

this.) This reflects the fact that kids this age are most vulnerable to sexploitation, where fake sexts are used to encourage kids to send sexts which are then used to blackmail them.

## CONSUMER

Youth at this stage usually see the online world as a personal space which they use for self-expression, socializing and self-directed learning. They are able to weigh risks and opportunities but pay more attention to possible benefits. They are becoming aware of the most abstract traces they leave online, like location tracking and data collection, but generally do not yet understand their possible future consequences. They have little knowledge of what platforms do with the content they post there and the data gathered about them.

At the beginning of this stage they still typically have little knowledge of how digital tools such as search engines work. For instance, they imagine Google as a human resource (a staff or network of people answering questions) rather than an algorithm. As a result, they rely too much on surface cues like the order of results to judge reliability and don't understand that what they search is visible to the search engine and that it may affect what ads and content they see there (and other places).

Children this age still think of privacy largely in interpersonal terms and are just starting to imagine possible unknown or future audiences for what they post online.

## 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

Spying on kids and taking devices away as a punishment is likely to backfire at this age. Heavy-handed filtering is also likely to cause a “forbidden fruit” response, and they’re often able to get around it. Even if it does work, it can prevent them from developing the digital skills they need to manage risks.

Tweens do still want to control what they see online: four in ten take steps to avoid seeing pornography. Help them to do that by showing them how to use filters themselves and to use search terms and content settings (for instance Restricted Mode on YouTube or TikTok). Because kids this age are starting to look for information about healthy sexuality, provide them with good quality sources like [SexandU](#) (a resource provided by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada) and CBC’s [About Sex](#).

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. If they really want to use a particular social media app, create a shared or parent-managed account they can use until they turn 13.

At this age they are conscious of the negative impacts of excessive or compulsive use, but don’t feel able to control it themselves. They need external supports and may even appreciate it if adults in their lives “play the bad guy” and force them to log off.

Most kids get their first phone not because they asked for it, but because their parents wanted to be able to stay in touch with them. This can cause conflict because the phone represents more *independence* for kids but more *supervision* to parents.

### CONTROL

Kids this age need safe spaces to hang out with people they already know, and safe ways of getting to know appropriate new people. Ask them if they know how to prevent people they don’t know from contacting them in games, social networks and other online spaces, and how to limit who can see things they post online. If they don’t, suggest learning how together.

When kids start using a new device or a new app, review the privacy features and make sure they are set to allow as little data collection as possible. 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.

### CO-VIEW

At this age, co-viewing may start to move from using media together to talking to kids about their media

lives: what they like, what they're excited about or looking forward to, and what worries or annoys them. While just being with them is an important step, this is also a great opportunity to help your kids think critically about the media they consume, by asking them questions about it and, sometimes, answering back.

Explore online interests together to begin with. Co-view things like craft or cooking videos where safety is an issue, and explore online communities like wikis that they're interested in.

Because kids this age are starting to think more in terms of values and morals, it's important to help them understand that media don't actually tell us what to think, but do have a big impact on what we think *about*: these messages come from who the main characters are or who is quoted in a news story who and what are shown as being important, and what things characters do that are rewarded or punished. That's why even the most "meaningless" media like cartoons, social media posts or video games can still have a big effect on us.

Help your kids understand that everyone else is sharing idealized images of themselves and their lives online. For example: talk about the characters in your kids' favourite shows or games, or their favourite streamers, influencers or YouTubers. Do they see certain types of people (different races, genders, body shapes, abilities, and so on) more or less often? Are different things often associated with different types of people?

## COACH

Because youth this age are becoming more independent, it is important to teach them how to balance risk and opportunity online. At the same time, it is also essential to help them take stock of the help-seeking resources available to them. Talk to your kids about how they use their phones and other devices and apps. Understanding the role those play in their lives can help to avoid conflict over rules.

Taking risks is a big part of what kids need at this age, but they need support and guidance to do it safely. Open, supportive conversations – both before and after encountering online risks – are needed to build resilience. They are likely to bristle if parents seem to be judging or criticizing them or the things they enjoy.

Teach them to 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 them 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.

Tweens' increasing ability to see shades of grey means that approaches to media use and "screen time" should now focus on identifying more on less healthful and productive uses of media technology and recognizing the ways in which the design of media tools may promote unhealthy patterns of use. Ask your kids which media activities they feel better after doing, and which make them feel worse. Every child is different: some might be affected by just a small amount of something, while for others it might take a large amount and some might not be affected at all. We can help them reflect on which media activities are good or bad for them and in what amounts.

They still need boundaries and to know they can come to you, and they are often relieved when a trusted adult steps in to help solve a problem. (Seven in ten still think that their parents know more about technology than they do!) Rules should include both a general principle (for instance, "Respect people's privacy online") and specific examples ("Always ask before you share a photo of anyone.") Reassure them that you won't overreact if they come to you for help and talk to them about where (and who) they could get help if they can't come to you.

Talking to kids *after* things have gone wrong – and helping them to deal with whatever has happened and find solutions – is also essential to helping them become resilient.

## Additional Resources

### FOR PARENTS

[Break the Fake: Critical Thinking vs. Disinformation](#)

[Co-Viewing With Your Kids](#)

[Dealing with Fear and Media](#)

[Family Guidelines for New Tech Devices](#)

[Helping Kids Get a Healthy Start with Phones](#)

[Protecting Your Privacy on Commercial Apps and Websites](#)

[Talking to Kids About Advertising](#)

[Talking to Kids About Casual Prejudice Online](#)

[Talking to Kids About Gender Stereotypes](#)

[Talking to Kids About Media and Body Image](#)

[Talking to Your Kids About Pornography](#)

[Understanding the Rating Systems](#)

[Using Parental Controls](#)

### FOR TWEENS

[Break the Fake: How to Tell What's True Online](#)

[Dealing with Digital Stress](#)

[Digital Citizenship: Building Empathy and Dealing with Conflict Online](#)

[Digital Citizenship: Ethics and Privacy](#)

[Digital Citizenship: Using Technology for Good](#)

[How to Search the Internet Effectively](#)

[What to Do If Someone is Mean to You Online](#)

[What Starts as a Joke Can End Up Hurting Someone](#)