BUILDING DIGITAL BALANCE: A FAMILY GUIDE TO GOOGLE'S SAFETY AND WELL-BEING TOOLS

It's easy to feel like kids, parents and tech are all constantly pulling in different directions. What can we all agree on? It's safe to say we all want our kids to grow into responsible, healthy, and engaged digital citizens. The best way to get us there? A collaborative approach that encourages kids as they navigate the online world in a way that is safe and smart. This tipsheet covers some of the ways that parents can support kids, and the Google tools that can help them along their journey.

When it comes to digital wellbeing, one of the most important things is to establish an ongoing conversation with your children about their online lives. There is no one size fits all; every family can develop strategies that work best for them. But having access to a wide range of tools can help you adapt those strategies at every stage of your kids' journey. Here are some of the key principles for those conversations:

- **Build a trusted relationship:** MediaSmarts *Young Canadians in a Wireless World* research has consistently shown that kids need to know they have a safe place to go if they encounter anything worrying or upsetting online. We encourage parents, educators and trusted adults to create a safe space where kids feel comfortable talking about tough issues without fear of judgment, lectures, or punishment. You can prepare yourself for these conversations with resources like the MediaSmarts self-directed workshop Raising Digitally Resilient Kids and the Google Digital Wellbeing Family Guide.

- **Foster resilience, not fear:** While educating about risks is important, try to avoid using "scare tactics". Some level of risk-taking is necessary

for developmental growth, and fear-based approaches actually make kids *less* safe. (See for instance Walsh, K., et al. (2022). Best practice framework for online safety education: Results from a rapid review of the international literature, expert review, and stakeholder consultation. *International journal of child-computer interaction, 33*, 100474.) Instead, try tools like SafeSearch and Family Link[*] to manage the risks younger kids face online, and focus on building digital resilience so your kids recognize and manage challenging online experiences. (Family Link is not available in Quebec.)

- **Talk about privacy & online interactions:** Engage in conversations with your kids about navigating interactions with people online. This includes understanding how to block, unfollow, or report content or users, how to decide what information is safe to share, the "red flags" that suggest it's time to leave a conversation, and when to talk to a trusted adult about it. Go through each app's privacy tools together to make sure you both know how to limit who can see what your child posts online. (For more information, see MediaSmarts' tipsheet on Communicating Safely Online.)

*Family Link and YouTube Kids not available in Québec

- **Focus on wellbeing beyond "screen time":** Another important tip is to help your kids spot activities online that lead them "down the rabbit hole" and to talk about what makes them feel uplifted or brings them down. Digital wellbeing is also about the value of balancing online and offline activities. So encourage non-digital experiences and help them find a blend that works for your family. While it's important to keep an eye on overall screen time, the quality, content, and context of online activities are far more important for a child's wellbeing. For instance, online activities like creative expression and social interaction can support wellbeing, while passive browsing, or "doom scrolling" or, can negatively impact mental health. Make sure to reiterate this to your kids, to encourage them to prioritize positive online exploration.

- **Model healthy habits:** Your own digital habits are a powerful influence. Think about your own device use, especially during family time, and show them how you manage distractions.

LEVERAGING GOOGLE'S TOOLS FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

Family discussions are critical in developing and promoting healthy habits. Set digital ground rules that are right for your family. At every step of your family's digital journey, Google offers tools to help parents stay in the loop and guide their child's online experience. Tools like [Family Link](#) are a great way to set boundaries and foster technology use that works for you. Family Link can help you with the following:

- **Monitoring App activity:** App activity reports show how much time your child spends on each app daily, weekly, and monthly. Use these insights to talk about their favorite apps, games, and where they spend most of their time, to create a dialogue about both their digital interests, and

how different places online can make them feel. Tools like the app and website evaluation tool in our [Raising Digitally Resilient Kids](#) kit can help guide these conversations.

- **Balancing screen time:** Family Link lets you set daily screen time limits and "bedtimes" for your child's device. Talk to your kids about what a reasonable amount of time might be and why device-free time is important for their mental and physical well-being, especially getting enough sleep.

- **Managing content consumption and app approvals:** Family Link helps manage content by letting you restrict content based on ratings and require approval for app downloads (free or paid). Reviewing app information together (things like ads and in-app purchases) gives you a chance to explain your rules and routines are in place and what kind of content is appropriate.

ADJUSTING TOOLS AS YOUR KIDS GROW

As kids gain more independence and responsibility, our approach has to shift to a shared responsibility. This can mean many things, including:

- **Adjusting settings as they grow:** Family Link lets you adjust account and device settings. Revisit these with your kids every now and then, giving them a bigger role in deciding what's appropriate as they get older.

- **Accessing device location:** As kids get older, you can use Family Link's ability to show their device's location as a way of giving them more independence in the offline world. They can roam more widely and for longer when you know how to find them if needed.

- **Supervising YouTube navigation:** YouTube offers [tools](#) like Bedtime and Take a Break reminders, which can help kids understand their own

boundaries. It also offers parental controls for YouTube Kids profiles and pre-teen supervised experiences on YouTube which are designed to support your kids as they grow.

NAVIGATING AI WITH YOUR KIDS

As Artificial Intelligence (AI) rapidly integrates into our daily lives, from personalized learning apps to creative chatbots, it's becoming essential to equip our children with the knowledge and skills to use this powerful technology safely and responsibly. Just as you are guiding them through navigating the internet, the key with AI is to foster a healthy mix of curiosity and critical thinking.

Google also provides support for youth in navigating generative AI.

- **Built-in safety measures:** Gemini, Google's AI assistant, is designed to be secure, with access controlled by parents for younger users. No data from youth accounts is used to improve or train Google's AI models.

- **AI Assistance:** Kids can log in to assistant-enabled devices with their own account managed by Family Link. This allows them to access games, activities, and stories designed for families.

- **AI literacy resources:** Google offers resources to help students develop critical thinking skills and learn how to use AI responsibly, like the AI Literacy Guide for students in grades 2 to 8, and a Family Guide to AI to guide a family conversation.

- **Creative tools:** If kids are using Gemini as a creative tool, take the opportunity to review with your kids the protections that limit the kind of content it can create. Spend some time and use Gemini to create a story, or write a silly song. Learn together about the fun ways kids can safely engage with AI.

- **Empowered learning:** Gemini can create new opportunities for kids to learn in a way that works best for them. Things like text-to-speech, creating study guides, and creative engagement with content all support differentiated learning, letting kids take learning into their own hands. Take the time to talk to your kids about how these tools can empower them in exploring their interests.

By working together, maintaining open communication, and continuously adapting your approach as your children grow and technology evolves, you can help them navigate the digital world safely and have technology be a positive part of their development and learning and wellbeing.