

BUILDING HEALTHY DIGITAL HABITS

If you have teenaged kids, the idea of **helping them to manage the role of digital devices in their lives** can be overwhelming. But it gets easier when we think of our goal as being not to eliminate connected devices, but to help teens develop **healthy digital habits** so they can use them intentionally and reflectively.

WHAT ARE HEALTHY DIGITAL HABITS?

Healthy digital habits are ones that make our tech use **manageable, meaningful** and **mindful**. That means they:

- Help you feel in control of your device use;
- Make sure tech doesn't get in the way of other things that you need or enjoy;
- Lead you to spend more time on things that matter to you; and
- Encourage you to use tech intentionally for specific reasons, instead of using it as a distraction or because you're on "autopilot."

WHEN CAN DIGITAL TECH USE BE UNHEALTHY?

How we use digital technology can affect us negatively when:

- It gets in the way of **things we need** (like sleep and exercise) or that we **enjoy** (like hobbies or spending time with family and friends)
- It keeps us from **dealing with our problems**
- It makes us **compare ourselves with other people**
- We **feel like we're not in control**: even if everything else is the same, we feel worse if we feel like the device or app is in control instead of us.

Unhealthy tech use can sometimes start with **something that makes us feel better**, like watching videos to relax. But it can end up being more stressful if we feel like we're not in control of it, or if we keep doing it at a time when we should be doing something else (like going to bed.)

HOW CAN WE HELP TEENS IMPROVE THEIR DIGITAL HABITS?

Keep (or set) a bedtime, and keep connected devices **out of their bedrooms**. If they use connected devices to wake up or to help get to sleep, replace them with an alarm clock or music player.

Give them an **excuse to disconnect**. One big reason why teens find it hard to disconnect is because they're **afraid their friends will be hurt or offended** if they don't respond to them right away. It may be a lot easier for them to disconnect if they can **blame it on you**.

If you do change your rules about when, where and how long kids can use connected devices give them a chance to **tell their friends about the new rules**.

Talk about the reasons they spend time on apps (keeping in touch with friends, distracting ourselves, cheering ourselves up) as well as how some features of apps can encourage us to use them more often, and

talk about the tools available to help them manage this time such as limit reminders and sleep mode.

Show them how to **turn off notifications** they don't need, and **set a schedule** for checking the rest. Encourage them to **mute or unfollow** accounts that make them feel bad.

Guide them to use apps and devices mindfully, by thinking about **why they're using them** and **when**.

Ask them to reflect on which things they do **make them feel better**, and which **make them feel worse** after doing them. For which does a **little time** make them feel better, but a lot makes them feel worse?

Tell them to watch for times when they **turn to the device without thinking about it**. Is it when they're bored? Stressed? Lonely? What can they do to **avoid unmindful device use**, and what else could they do in those situations?

Support them to become more independent. Don't think of your job as being about policing screen time, but about **supporting their success** in managing it. Encourage them to participate in setting expectations and limits.

Model healthy device use. Try to follow the rules you set for them, and make a point of saying out loud **why you're using an app or device**. You don't have to act like you've got it all figured out: **be open about your own challenges and strategies** for managing digital stress.

Use tech with them. You can **watch videos or play video games** together, or **use apps together** - anything from using [Merlin](#) to go birdwatching to getting them to **show you what they love** about their favourite social media app. Teens are actually more likely than parents to want to **use apps together** with their families!

HOW CAN WE HELP TEENS NAVIGATE DIFFICULT ONLINE CONVERSATIONS?

Help your kids **name and talk about their emotions**, and to recognize how online interactions make them feel. Teach them ways of **managing strong feelings** like:

- Take a **deep breath**: Filling your lungs slowly tells your brain to calm down and relax.
- Do a **body scan**: Tell them to sit down somewhere comfortable and close their eyes. Starting with the top of their head, have them focus on different parts of their body, one at a time, and pay attention to what they feel. If they feel tight or hot anywhere, they should tense and then relax that muscle.
- **Listen to music** that calms or relaxes you, or that just makes you feel good.
- **Go outside and get active**. Getting fresh air and moving your body are some of the best ways to deal with stress and strong feelings. If going outside isn't possible, tell them to do something physical indoors instead. (They can combine this and the last one by putting music on and dancing!)

None of these mean they should **ignore their problems**. Instead, they're ways of cooling down and **getting perspective** before deciding how to deal with a problem.

Make sure they know they can **talk to you** if they experience a difficult situation like cyberbullying - and **respond with empathy** when they do. Teens often pretend not to be bothered by cyberbullying or hope it will go away, but problem-solving and seeking social support are more effective.

Talk about what **other sources of support** they could turn to, such as [Kids Help Phone](#), if they didn't feel comfortable coming to you.

Ask teens 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. Make sure your kids know how to "block" someone they don't want contacting them.

Check that their **privacy settings are at the strictest levels by default** so they don't accidentally share things with a larger audience than they meant to.

Some social media platforms offer tools that can help parents and teens manage this. For instance, Teen Accounts on Instagram are private by default, and teens are placed in the strictest messaging settings, so they can only be messaged by people they follow or are already connected to. Teen Accounts are turned on automatically, so parents don't have to do anything – and teens under 16 need a parent's permission to change any settings to be less strict.

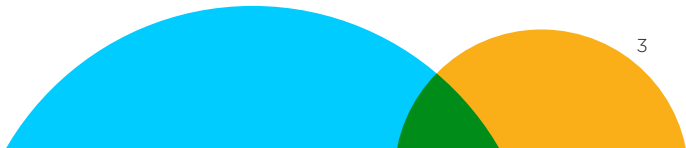
Talk with them about the importance of staying safe online. Empower them to recognize online exploitation and know how to get help if they need it.

Help them to recognize warning signs such as:

- **excessive flattery**, especially regarding their appearance
- trying to **move the conversation** to another platform or a more private online space
- asking about times and places where they could meet or could **communicate online in private**
- introducing **sex or sexual topics** into the conversation, or requesting sexual images
- sharing or offering to share **sexual images**, either pornography or pictures of themselves
- asking them **not to tell their parents or their friends** about a conversation or about the relationship

Talk to your kids about healthy relationships and the importance of **not feeling pressured** into doing things they don't want to do – like taking explicit pictures of themselves.

Help them practice ways of **safely getting out of an online conversation**, like telling the person that you are calling them, and encourage them to block and report anybody online that makes them feel uncomfortable.



Disclaimer: Meta provides financial support to MediaSmarts. This tip sheet has been developed in collaboration between Meta and MediaSmarts. MediaSmarts does not endorse any commercial entity, product or service. No endorsement is implied.