# project shift.

Creating a safer digital world for young women.

# A GUIDE FOR TRUSTED ADULTS

Practical Tips and Tools for Supporting Girls and Young Women Navigating Life Online

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

You're reading this because there are girls and young women in your life who trust you, rely on you, and turn to you for help and support when they need it. Even though more and more of young people's lives are happening online, often on platforms and even devices you may not be familiar with, they still need to be able to count on you. This guide will give you an overview of some of the challenges girls face when they're online, as well as practical tips and tools for what to do when they come for help.

The inspiration for this guide was our conversations with girls – including trans, non-binary and gender-nonconforming youth – about what they want from the adults in their lives. They don't want to be judged, shamed, or blamed, but to build solutions together.

Keeping girls and young women safe is very important to us at the YWCA. Understanding rights and responsibilities is an important part of being able to keep girls and young women safe online and in the community. We hope that once you have read this guide, you will be a better advocate for the girls and young women in your life.  YWCA Canada has resources to help girls to be excellent leaders and self-advocates.
(http://ywcacanada.ca/en/girls_and_young_women)

## WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

### Parents and Guardians

Despite the ever-changing digital world that kids and teens live in, the role of parents/guardians is still an extremely important one: two-thirds of kids and teens who turn to their parents for help about online issues say it made the situation better. Parents are their top source of information as late as Grade 8, and are still an important resource throughout

high school. As well, parents have an essential role to play in communicating family values to their children: for example, students whose parents have set down rules about treating others with respect online are one-third less likely to have been mean and cruel to someone online. However, parents often tell us that they feel out of their depth when dealing with their kids' online lives. If you're a parent or guardian to a girl or young woman, this guide will help you to be more involved in her digital life.

## Teachers

Teachers are probably the most important adults in girls' lives after parents and in many cases they are the most important source of information about online issues. Kids are much less likely to turn to teachers for support though, largely because they feel that there's little teachers can do to help them. This guide includes practical advice that you can give to girls in many situations where classroom rules don't apply.

## Mentors

Many other adults play important roles in girls' lives, and if girls are unwilling or unable to turn to a parent or teacher these mentors can be lifesavers. If there are girls or young women who look to you for support or advice, it's essential that you know the issues they're facing and that you're able to help.

## Health and Wellness Providers

Health and social service professionals (i.e. doctors, counsellors, etc.) are dealing more and more with the impact of digital communication on girls' lives, but many aren't sufficiently familiar with the online world to address it. This guide will help you to understand how girls' online lives can affect their mental and physical health.

## Law Enforcement

Police officers can play a very important role in girls' online lives, whether it's providing information as a school resource officer or helping to deal with issues like sexting and harassment. Women who have sought help from law enforcement in dealing with cyberviolence report sometimes facing skepticism, dismissiveness, and a poor understanding

of how the law applies to the online context. It's important that police and others in similar roles have a clear understanding of the issues in order to respond effectively and sympathetically.

### Information, Communications and Technology Professionals

People who work in the ICT sector have an incredible opportunity to contribute to making the digital world safer for girls and young women. This guide will help folks developing content, moderating pages and reviewing reports to have a greater understanding of the issues facing girls and young women online.

## WHY WORRY ABOUT CYBERVIOLENCE?

People sometimes dismiss what happens online as "not real" or suggest that people who are survivors of cyberviolence can just "turn off" the devices and platforms where it's happening. But threats, harassment, stalking and other forms of violence suffered by women and girls online can have a real impact on their mental and physical health, and broader effects on their lives and our society as a whole.

### What Does "Cyberviolence" Mean?

We use the term "cyberviolence" to mean any harmful act carried out through networked technology. This includes many of the behaviours often described as "cyberbullying" (such as spreading rumours about someone, calling them names, impersonating them online, spreading intimate or embarrassing images, doxing, targeting them with threats or sexist language etc.) as well as invading their privacy, stalking or monitoring them, and so on. It may be carried out by peers, friends, strangers, or romantic partners across various networked technologies such as social media, texts, apps, and gaming. We've chosen to use this term because it respects the serious harm that these behaviours can do.

### Online/Offline Overlap

While cyberviolence is an important issue in its own right, it's important to recognize that it is often connected to offline violence as well: online harassment can easily move offline (such as when harassers release their targets' personal information), and online relationship violence is often part of an abusive relationship that plays out face-to-face as well.

## Emotional Impact

Cyberviolence can have a major impact on girls' emotional health. One-third of youth who are bullied online have symptoms of depression, and online harassment or abusive relationships can have other detrimental effects that can lead to self-harm or that can last for years or a lifetime.

## Narrowed Horizons

As well as the emotional impact, cyberviolence against women also narrows their horizons by forcing them out of spaces where they don't feel safe or welcome. Besides being a violation of their human rights, this can have numerous negative effects, such as negatively impacting their sense of safety, limiting their access to economic opportunities, or to contributing to online social discourse.

## Safety

Girls are significantly more likely than boys to feel that the Internet is an unsafe space for them, and significantly more girls than boys fear they could be hurt if they talk to someone they don't know online. More girls than boys also feel their parents are worried that they can get hurt online. This fear can actually make girls less safe, by preventing them from developing the ability to manage online risk. More restrictive approaches to online safety can produce users who are less able to keep themselves safe online and are generally less confident and capable users of digital technology.

## Economic

To be competitive on the international stage, Canada needs more girls and young women to get involved in subjects like computer programming and software engineering, but girls who see the Internet as a dangerous place are unlikely to pursue careers in those fields. Their sense that those fields aren't welcoming to them is often justified: many of the early experiences that act as gateways, such as video gaming, can be hostile to girls. To address this, we need both to equip girls with skills for keeping themselves safe, rather than making them afraid of the online world, and improve the culture of online spaces so that women and others who are currently marginalized, excluded or harassed feel welcome.

**Participation In the Public Sphere**

Finally, when girls and women are driven off the Internet they lose the ability to be a part of the platforms where our public debates take place. This has happened to quite a few women who have had to quit social networks due to the harassment they've received. We are failing as a democracy if we allow fear, harassment and other forms of cyberviolence to keep girls and women from being able to exercise their full rights as citizens.

# 2. WHAT NOT TO DO

Before we cover how to best support girls and young women, here are some common responses that should be avoided. A lot of these are understandable reactions, but in each case there are good reasons not to do them.

1. When they come to you for help, don't dismiss what's happened because it's "just online." What happens online can be just as real as what happens offline, in young people's lives and in the law. Telling someone she should "just stop using" a particular social network or should "just ignore" someone harassing them makes things worse because it denies the impact of what's happening and ignores the importance of the Internet and connected devices to young people.

2. At the same time, try not to overreact. Don't take away a device or keep them off the Internet in the hope of eliminating the source of the problem: for young people, this is equal to social death and will leave them feeling even more victimized. Punishing a victim for what is happening to them will probably cause them to avoid confiding in you again when feeling threatened. As well, cutting or limiting Internet access may actually make youth more vulnerable and less resilient to future problems.

3. Don't blame them for what happened, even if they are partly responsible. While poor decisions can be a good learning opportunity down the line, when they first come to you it's important to be supportive and reassure them that you're on their side – or they may not come to you next time.

4. Never spy on kids online without their knowledge. Kids – and teens in particular – are often very skilled at avoiding surveillance, and if they feel they have to use fake accounts or connect in unsupervised spaces to get some privacy they're much less likely to come to you for help if they run into trouble. With younger girls, or for those who have shown bad judgment in the past, it may be appropriate to use surveillance software, but be open about the fact that you're doing it and why. Even with young

kids, though, it's more important to have open and ongoing conversations about their online lives, and make sure that those continue as they get older.

5.  When you do talk to them, don't rely on scare tactics to keep them safe. One reason is that they don't work. One American study found that teens who knew that sending or forwarding sexts was against the law – and might result in very serious consequences – were more likely to do this than those who didn't know. As well, while these behaviours are less common than many youth and adults think, they are common enough for girls to know that extreme consequences are fairly uncommon, so stressing those will just make you seem unrealistic and out of touch. Finally, trying to frighten them with the risk of things like criminal prosecution may keep them from coming to you for help.

> "Teens seemed to find that when they did show their pages to their mothers, the mothers' worries quickly dissipated, and both mother and daughter found that social networking sites were 'no big deal'... But when a mother or father 'snooped' on the pages, anger and misunderstanding would often result, and the young people then focused on the feelings that their privacy had been invaded.
>
> LYNN SCHOFIELD CLARK,
> THE PARENT APP

6.  At the same time, don't be afraid to set rules and limits. Young people generally want the adults in their lives to set limits and help them tell right from wrong. It's important, though, to communicate rules clearly and to make sure they are flexible and focused on resolving the situation, rather than punishing the people involved: "zero tolerance" policies and harsh punishments make youth less likely to report bullying and similar behaviours when they happen. What may be more valuable than inflexible policies are clear, well-established procedures that let kids know what to do when things go wrong.

7.  Finally, don't assume youth know everything about how their online tools and platforms work. They do learn quickly when they first start using them, but may not understand the more complicated tools and settings (or their consequences). It's also important to remember that young people are still learning to manage their emotions and negotiate relationships, online and offline, and still need the guidance and emotional support that they've always looked for in the trusted adults in their lives.

# 3. WHAT TO SAY AND WHAT TO DO

With all that in mind, what can you do to help a girl or young woman who needs help with an online issue? The good news is that you've already helped just by listening: young people consistently say that talking to someone about an online crisis is the best way of coping with it. After the crisis has passed, make sure to check in regularly to make sure things are going better.

You can provide more concrete help, too. The first thing is to be informed: learn about and explore the sites that the youth who rely on you use. As well, keep in mind that for most young people, the online and offline world aren't separate. Youth prefer to socialize online with the same people they see offline, and most online problems have at least some roots in the offline world.

Here are some tips on helping young people deal with specific issues:

## ONLINE HARASSMENT

One of the most common problems faced by girls and young women online is harassment. This can take many forms such as threats of violence or embarrassment, releasing personal information ("doxing"), repeated unwanted contact ("cyberstalking"), and verbal abuse. When it comes to dealing with it, a key question is whether it's being done by people they know or by strangers.

| PHYSICAL | VERBAL | SOCIAL | CYBER |
|---|---|---|---|
| Physical bullying is when someone uses their body or objects to cause harm to another person.<br><br>EXAMPLES: Hitting, punching, kicking, spitting or breaking someone's belongings. | Verbal bullying is when someone uses their words to hurt another person.<br><br>EXAMPLES: Name-calling, put-downs, threats or teasing. | Social bullying is when someone uses their friends and relationships to hurt someone else.<br><br>EXAMPLES: Spreading rumours, gossiping, excluding others from a group or making others look foolish or unintelligent. | Cyberbullying is when someone uses communication technologies (the Internet, social media, texts, etc.) to harass or intimidate others.<br><br>EXAMPLES: Sending mean or threatening emails/texts/messages, posting embarrassing photos of someone online or creating websites or profiles to make fun of others. |

## By Strangers

"Trolling" is usually partly or fully anonymous, as the perpetrator may choose someone they do not know or know only online. The trolling event is generally isolated, continuing only until the troll has gotten the reaction he wants. Trolling often happens in public online spaces, such as open social networks (like Twitter) or games, since it's usually as much about the troll performing for his peers as it is about the target's reaction.

### What To Do:

**Block or mute:**
Because strangers usually only have a single point of contact, it can sometimes be most effective to simply block or mute them. (To "block" or "unfriend" someone on social networks means to cut off contact completely and permanently; to "mute" or "unfollow" someone means that you will no longer see what they post, but they don't know it.) Most social networking sites offer lots of choices if you want to stop seeing someone's posts or keep them from seeing yours. Visit the site's safety centre to learn what privacy and safety features it offers, keeping in mind these can change regularly.

Some social networks also allow you to filter out content containing particular keywords and even images as well, which can be useful in muting stranger harassment. However, if you're supporting a young woman in this situation make sure she gets evidence of what's happening before blocking or muting the harasser, in case it continues and she needs to take things further.

**Report:**
The next step is to report the harasser to the social network or platform(s) where the harassment is happening. Make sure to state that the harassment is a violation of the site's terms and conditions.

**Inform the police:**
If blocking or reporting fails to solve the problem, or if the harasser is threatening violence, making her feel unsafe, or trying to blackmail her (for example, threatening to spread embarrassing photos if she doesn't do what he wants) you should help her go to the police. See "What's the Law?" for different legal options and to help make sure action is taken to address the problem.

## By Peers

Though harassment by strangers can be very serious, it's more common for girls to be harassed by people they know. Harassment by peers is likely to be more personal: it can take the form of name-calling, spreading rumours, online impersonation (either using someone's social network account without permission or setting up a false account and pretending to be that person) and behaviours like "slut shaming" that punish girls for going outside of accepted norms. (These norms are extremely flexible, for example an unpopular girl may be slut-shamed for wearing an outfit or doing a pose that might pass without comment by someone

### REPORTING HARASSMENT ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

*Most large social networks have safety centers with specific tips on how to deal with harassment on those platforms:*

*Facebook https://www.facebook.com/safety*

*Twitter https://about.twitter.com/safety*

*Instagram https://help.instagram.com/285881641526716/*

*Snapchat https://www.snapchat.com/safety*

more popular.) Girls may also be subject to sexual harassment such as unwanted sexual overtures, requests for nude or sexy photos from or unwanted nude photos sent by boys.

It's important to distinguish between harassment and drama. One of the key differences between them is in drama the people involved have roughly the same amount of "social power". If more witnesses to the drama support one person than the other though, or something else happens to weaken one person's social status, drama can easily turn into harassment. A situation may also be harassment from the beginning, and may happen mostly in private – such as through threatening or abusive text messages – though it's rare that there are no witnesses at all. (We'll look at drama in "Friends and Frenemies" below.)

When a girl who's being harassed comes to you for support, the first step is to listen and acknowledge her feelings about the situation. Harassment can be extremely stressful, but talking about it has been shown to be effective in helping targets feel better.

As well, encourage her not to fight back. Some of the more common reasons young people give for being mean involve getting back at someone for something they did, but not only does this encourage further harassment, it makes her case weaker if she wants to report the harassment to a social network or to the police. More importantly, retaliating isn't generally successful either as a way of ending the situation or as a coping method.

Girls may be reluctant to take action against harassment because they're afraid of being seen as "not having a sense of humour" or "taking things too seriously": the most common reason given for online meanness is "I was just joking around". It is possible that youth who engage in online harassment may genuinely see what they are doing as "just joking" while being either willfully or unwittingly blind to how it hurts others. This makes it all the more important to help girls stand up to harassment so it can no longer be seen as acceptable behaviour.

Next, you may want to help by blocking the harasser from contacting her, though this may not be practical if the perpetrator is a friend or peer. Either way, encourage her to gather evidence: save texts and emails, and take screenshots of anything that might disappear later (visit www.take-a-screenshot.org to learn how to do this in different browsers and devices).

## GATHERING EVIDENCE

The organization Without My Consent suggests keeping track of evidence in a six-column chart with these headings:

1. **Date:** When it happened.
2. **What happened:** Be as clear and specific as possible, like "He sent four texts threatening to hurt me: [quote texts]"
3. **Evidence that it happened:** Texts, emails, screenshots, etc. Make backup copies in several places.
4. **Who you think did it:** Say who you think was responsible for each incident and why.
5. **Evidence they did it:** The reasons why you believe it was this person. Some may be obvious (their name on an email) while others require a bit more detective work (references to something that happened in a game session you were both in.)
6. **Evidence still needed:** If you don't feel you have enough evidence in columns 3 and 5, write what you need here.

With evidence in hand you can now help her consider other options:

Asking the harasser to stop. This is more likely to work with peers than strangers because there is already a personal connection and it's possible that what's being done isn't genuinely meant to be hurtful. As well, before taking further steps it may be important to clearly show the harasser that what they're doing is unwelcome.

Reporting to the school if the harasser is a classmate. Schools and teachers are increasingly required by provinces to take action on cyberbullying and harassment that happen between students. Unfortunately, young people generally prefer not to report online harassment to their schools, in part because "zero-tolerance" policies can escalate the situation and make the target feel even less in control. It's important to know the school's policy and procedures on harassment and bullying before you take or recommend this step.

Reporting it to the social network, game or other platform where the harassment is happening. See "Reporting Harassment on Social Networks" for more information on how to do this.

Girls may be more reluctant to report it to the police when they're being harassed, but you should encourage them to do so if the harasser is threatening violence, making her feel unsafe, or trying to blackmail her (for example, threatening to spread embarrassing photos if she doesn't do what he wants). See "What's the Law?" for different legal options and to help make sure her problem gets acted on.

## ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

Young women don't just need our support in dealing with harassment: they also need help navigating the often intense world of online relationships. For girls, friends are the most important part of their online lives, but romantic partners can be a challenge as well.

### Managing Friends and Frenemies

While drama is less serious than harassment, it can still be stressful – especially when it happens to "best friends forever". An important feature of drama is that it's seen by teens as an isolated incident, something that can "blow over" after which those involved can go back to being friends, which is one reason why they don't consider it bullying. As the name suggests, drama is in some ways a public performance being done for friends and peers, and friends will often give their support to one or the other person involved.

It's important to talk to girls about how to react appropriately to online drama and give them the skills to mediate between friends so situations don't spiral out of control. It's not at all difficult for something that's intended as just a joke, or seen as everyday "drama," to escalate into serious conflict. Help girls to start by assuming that the other person didn't mean to make them mad, and to try to talk to them face-to-face before responding online. When we engage with people online, we don't get a lot of the signals – like tone of voice or body language – that help us understand how a person feels and make us feel empathy. So people may over-react and read something neutral as being negative.

Drama is also one of the few situations where reaching out to friends doesn't help: some research suggests that when girls are in conflict with a friend, texting with other friends about the situation is more likely to make them angrier and to respond more severely.

Instead, you can help her to recognize the physical signs that tell her that she's upset or scared – like feeling tense or having a racing heart – and encourage her to get offline for a while until she calms down. Sometimes waiting a day before responding makes all the difference in the world.

Distinguishing between drama and harassment is key in deciding whether mediation is likely to help. In drama, where both people have roughly equal power, both have an interest in finding a solution: in harassment or bullying, where one person has more power than the other, mediation is most likely to make things worse.

*HOW CAN YOU HELP A GIRL WHO ISN'T HAPPY WITH A PHOTO OF HER THAT'S BEEN POSTED?*

*A lot of drama between young people has to do with photos. Some services, like Facebook, let you remove your name from a tagged photo. It doesn't remove the image but it does make it harder to find.*

*If the photo is being used to harass or bully her, you can report it and ask for it to be removed: nearly all social networks have a "Report" button or something similar.*

*A better first step, though, is to just ask the person who posted or shared the photo to take it down. This is actually the preferred strategy for teens and it generally works.*

*(This is just about unflattering or embarrassing photos. For partly or fully nude or sexual photos, see "Online Relationship Abuse" below.)*

### Flirting and Dating Online

What about romantic relationships? Unlike friendships, MediaSmarts research suggests that young women prefer to interact with their boyfriends and girlfriends primarily offline: just one in ten girls has flirted with someone anonymously online, for instance. Some young women do use social networks to approach possible partners, or use dating apps, so it's important to talk to them about managing their safety and privacy:

- Help them double-check the privacy settings on their dating apps to make sure they're only sharing what they want to share, and only with the people they want to see it.
- Encourage them not to send any photos or personal information they're not comfortable with. See "Sexting" below for more on this.
- Make sure that they always tell someone they trust before they go on a date in person, even if it's with someone they already know.

Social networks make dating a more public act than it once was (particularly in places like Facebook where you're expected to provide your "relationship status"), it can be harder for girls to end a relationship that takes place partially online. Girls also report having more trouble getting over a breakup if their partner is online. Make sure that you're supporting her in the decisions she makes about her romantic life and encourage her not to "cyber-stalk" her ex or cut them out completely – research says that being "just friends" on social media helps you get over it sooner.

## Online Relationship Abuse

Relationship violence and abuse can also play out online in the form of stalking, sending threatening or abusive messages, or pressure for sex or sexual photos. According to a 2013 study, one in four teens who are currently dating say that their partners have stalked them, threatened them, impersonated them on social networks, sent them abusive messages, pressured them for sex or for sexual photos, or embarrassed them publicly using digital media. These actions are mostly kept between the perpetrator and the target, but in some cases – such as when the perpetrator spreads rumours about the target or shares embarrassing material – perpetrators may use an audience to make things worse. In the worst cases, these things may happen following a sexual assault rather than a consensual relationship.

Things like scaring someone, making them feel bad all the time, cutting them off from friends and family, humiliating them by exposing private or sexual material, or keeping tabs on them all the time are still abuse.

Abusive online relationships are usually connected to abusive relationships offline, but because lots of teens are connected to their online social worlds 24/7 this can make it easier for abusers to keep tabs on their victims and make the victim feel like there's no way for them to get away.

Unlike harassment, girls rarely tell their parents about relationship abuse. Here are some signs that a young woman may be involved in an abusive online relationship:

- Avoids contact with family and friends

- Has lower self-confidence or self-esteem

- Has a partner who expects them to "check in" frequently

- Gets frequent calls or messages from their partner, especially harassing or threatening ones

- Seems angry or depressed after using their phone or social media

- Doesn't want to talk about their relationship with their partner or with an adult

Don't wait until you think a girl might be involved in an abusive relationship to talk about it: discussions about healthy relationships, both online and off, need to start young and continue throughout the teen years. Unlike harassment, girls may not genuinely understand that some of these behaviours are not normal or healthy, and they may feel like they're partly to blame (especially if they engage in some of the same behaviours themselves: about a quarter of teens in abusive relationships are both victims and abusers). In some cases, they may even take abusive behaviours, such as their partner wanting to keep constant tabs on them, as evidence of love and commitment – a belief that can be encouraged by unhealthy views of relationships they get from peers, family and media. As well, teens' inexperience with relationships and still-developing skills in managing conflict can make them more likely to both engage in and experience abuse in a relationship.

We need to teach girls the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship such as when one partner tries to control, isolate or humiliate the other and help them understand the importance of not feeling pressured into doing things they don't want to do – like taking or sharing explicit pictures. If you think a girl you know is involved in an abusive relationship, be clear that you think it is unhealthy but don't try to push them into leaving it. Instead, try to break her isolation by encouraging her to spend more time with family and friends. You can also talk to her friends to see if they have similar concerns. Finally, help her not to blame herself for her partner's actions: even if she was also involved in abusive behaviours, that doesn't excuse the abuse she has suffered.

The same GPS apps that parents use to keep their kids safe can be used by abusive partners: as Fionna McCormack, CEO of Domestic Violence Victoria puts it, "Women are often surprised that their partners or ex-partners are able to keep tabs on their every movement without realising that their phones are facilitating his stalking". Girls who are getting out of abusive relationships should make sure that their GPS is turned off by default (you can always turn it back on briefly if you need it) and that they've uninstalled any apps that their ex-partners might be using to track them.

## SEXTING

Take a deep breath. Here's a reality check about sexting: first, fewer girls are sending sexts than you probably think – overall, fewer than one in ten girls in grades 7 to 11 report sending one. Second, most young women who've sent sexts didn't experience any negative consequences.

That doesn't mean that there's nothing to worry about, but in order to understand how to support young women on this topic we need to know more about why people send and share sexts.

### 📱 Sending Sexts

Surveys of youth have shown that the two most common reasons for sending sexts are to get a prospective partner's attention and to show love and trust towards an established partner. Social expectations of peers can also influence decisions on sharing, and this pressure may lead girls to send sexts.

You shouldn't overstate the risks of sexting because it won't reflect their lived experience. By describing sexting as an inherently risky act means that if things do go wrong, we're more likely to blame the original sender of the sext rather than the person who shared it.

What is likely to end badly is when girls are coerced or pressured into sending sexts: most young women who have had negative experiences with sexting say this was the reason they'd sexted their partners.

Here are some tips for talking about sexting in a supportive way:

- First, don't assume that girls use the term "sexting." There are many different slang terms for sending nude or sexy photos, so it's important to be clear about what you're talking about.

- Stress how uncommon this kind of behaviour is. Girls may be motivated to engage in sexting if they believe "everybody is doing it", so it is important for them to understand how rare these activities really are.
- Discuss appropriate ways of showing you care for someone. Girls may think that sharing a nude or sexy photo with a romantic partner– or someone they want to date – shows they love or trust them.
- Encourage girls to think about the difference between being liked for who they are and being popular: youth who say wanting to be popular is important to them are more likely to share information about themselves.
- Remind them they shouldn't do or share anything they don't want to. Tell girls that if somebody asks them to send something they are not comfortable sending that they have the right to say no. No one who loves or respects someone will pressure or threaten them to send a photo (or share anything else that's private).
- Make sure they know that they can come to you (or another trusted adult) for help and support if things ever go wrong, and that they will not be in trouble for sending the original sext (see "What's the law?" below for more information).

### Shared Sexts

As important as it is to advise young people not to send things that they might regret later on, it's just as important to make sure they understand the harm they can do by passing along and sharing things like this with others. This might happen to start some "drama", for revenge, or just to get some laughs at a friend's expense, but the common thread is a disregard for the person's feelings and how they might be affected. (Legally, this is referred to as "Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Images": see "What's the Law" below.) Unfortunately, the general response when a sext becomes public is to blame the sender and excuse the person who shared the sext.

Once private material is made public to even a limited audience, it can spread worldwide. A whole industry of 'parasite' websites benefit from this by trawling for and re-posting nude or suggestive images posted in public forums. As well, perpetrators in abusive relationships may use the threat of releasing personal material to coerce or blackmail their partners.

The tween and teen years are the age where romantic relationships begin and friendships become the most intense, both of which can lead to youth making bad choices about sharing personal material. It's vital that tweens and teens be taught about healthy relationships and to recognize the signs of an unhealthy relationship, and how that relates to sharing private material. We can also:

- Help girls to recognize that boys are often under social pressure to share sexts they receive.
- Discourage girls from joining in on "slut-shaming" and otherwise punishing girls whose sexts are shared.
- Question attitudes towards gender that excuse boys for sending (and sharing) sexts but blame girls.
- Challenge the notion that girls who send sexts give up their right to privacy and dignity.

## WHAT'S THE LAW?

One of the times young women most need the help of a trusted adult is when they have to turn to the law for help. That's why it's especially important to have a clear understanding of how Canadian law applies to the challenges girls face online.

### Criminal Law

There are two main legal actions available under the Criminal Code: criminal charges and a peace bond.

- Criminal harassment means following or communicating with someone in a way that makes them feel fearful, including through digital media. Even if the perpetrator did not intend to frighten the victim, he or she can be charged with harassment if the target feels threatened.
- Publishing intimate images without consent involves both intentionally spreading an image "in which the person is nude, is exposing his or her genital organs or anal region or her breasts or is engaged in explicit sexual activity" as well as "being reckless as to whether or not that person gave their consent to that conduct". This section of the Criminal Code also gives judges the power to order the images to be removed from computer systems.
- If the person in the photo is underage, the person who spread it may also be charged with the distribution of child pornography.
- Threatening to share an intimate image of a girl if she doesn't do something (such as sending more photos) may also be extortion.

The police or a justice of the peace can also help her request a peace bond or protection order that will place some restrictions on what the person harassing her or sharing photos can do, such as preventing them from contacting her either online or offline. If the person breaks the peace bond you should help to contact the police immediately to let them know.

## CAN SHE BE CHARGED?

*Girls whose sexts have been shared may be reluctant to go to police because they're afraid that they will be charged with producing child pornography. It's important to reassure them that the law is made to protect them and that it is very unlikely that a girl would be charged for sending a sext of herself to a partner: while there have been child pornography charges laid in connection to sexting, only the people who shared the sexts have ever been charged.*

*"Crown Attorneys must be vigilant and thorough when providing advice on, or resolving cases involving minor-to-minor sexting. Many factors must be considered, including whether the sexual activity and creation of the image was in fact consensual or a product of coercive behaviour, whether any images were distributed to others or uploaded to the Internet, and the actual harm caused by the image or the potential harm it could cause."*

*PRACTICE NOTE: IMAGE EXPLOITATION, NOVA SCOTIA PUBLIC PROSECUTION SERVICE*

To support a young woman who is considering going to the police, make sure she has as much evidence as possible (see "Gathering evidence" for more information on this) and be prepared to advocate for her. While police officers and Crown Attorneys are now well-informed about Internet law, there may still be some who don't consider what happens online to be "real" or who are likely to blame girls for sending sexts rather than the person who published them. If possible, arrange for her to get professional legal help.

## Civil Law

There are also often steps you can take under civil law. One advantage of the civil law approach is that you don't have to prove your case beyond a reasonable doubt: civil cases are judged on "the balance of probabilities", which means the side that has more (or better) evidence will generally win a suit.

Before launching a civil suit, it is strongly recommended that you get help from a lawyer familiar with the issue (privacy law, defamation law, etc.). Unlike the Criminal Code, which applies to all of Canada, civil law is often quite different from province to province, so it's important to have expert guidance.

However, in the case of shared sexts, there is a step that a young woman can take that doesn't require a lawyer if she took the photo that was shared herself. Under the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), websites that are hosted in the United States are required to take down photos and other copyrighted material that were posted without the copyright holder's permission. You can find a sample DMCA notice, as well as more information on using the DMCA to have photos taken down, at http://www.withoutmyconsent.org/resources/take -down.

# 4. THE BIGGER PICTURE

Kids' online lives don't exist in a vacuum. They're informed and influenced by the messages they receive about gender, sexuality and relationships they get from their peers, their family and media. Tweens and teens are particularly sensitive to what's called social norming – influencing people by making them more aware of how others act. Young people often overestimate how common things like sexting and cyberbullying are, which makes these behaviours seem more acceptable. Media aimed at youth may also suggest that aggression and possessiveness are a normal part of friendships and romantic relationships, while many online spaces popular with youth have cultures in which bullying, sexism, racism, homophobia and similar attitudes are tolerated or even normalized.

Fortunately, there are ways for the adults in young people's lives to help counter this. To start, we can teach youth media literacy skills that help them to recognize the artificial nature of media and to understand the reasons why violence and aggression are so much more common in media than in real life. We can also empower and encourage young people to stand up for their beliefs, even when they're in environments where negative behaviours and attitudes are the norm. Studies have shown that members of a group are much less likely to conform to the group's attitudes if even one person expresses a different opinion.

## TALKING ABOUT SEXISM IN MEDIA

To really address the issues that girls and young women face online, we need to talk about gender roles – to both boys and girls. When you talk to youth, explain how girls and boys may feel they have to act in certain ways because of established gender roles.

For example, boys may feel pressured by friends to prove their masculinity by sharing sexual photos that their partners have sent them. Ideas about gender can also lead us to view the same actions differently depending on whether a boy or a girl did them. While boys are about as likely to send sexts as girls are, for example, and theirs are more likely to be forwarded, there's definitely a double standard applied when those get into the wrong hands: women experience more distress when their sexts are shared than men do, and are likely to face more severe consequences as well.

At the same time, adults are often more protective of girls than of boys and consequently boys often have fewer rules online than girls (which is a way of letting them off the hook for their behaviour). In addition, we give girls the impression that the Internet is a dangerous place for them. This may limit their opportunities and keep them from learning tools and strategies for dealing with the challenges they face.

The pressure to always be camera-ready and look perfect in social media can also be stressful for girls and can have negative effects on their body image. It's important to help them understand three key ideas that have been shown to reduce this stress:

- Media images aren't real (even photos of your friends are likely edited, taken from the most flattering angle, or the best one out of a dozen or more that were taken).
- You shouldn't fall into the trap of comparing yourself to other people, even your friends.
- There's nothing universal about our ideas of the "ideal" body shape – different body shapes have been preferred through history and around the world.

## TALKING ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS IN MEDIA

Young women look to the media to see what's normal in relationships, too. Try to be aware of what girls and young women are watching, playing and listening to and be ready to talk about ways that they depict romantic relationships. TV shows, music, video games and advertising can all reflect unhealthy attitudes like possessiveness, aggression and even violence as being normal, and reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. Young people who see either physically or psychologically abusive relationships in media are more likely to be psychologically abusive towards their partners.

We need to talk to all children and youth about media portrayals of relationships and about gender stereotypes. Deconstructing and confronting gender roles can help youth to resist pressure from their partners and peers to do things like send sexual photos to their partner or sharing them with their friends.

On the plus side, however, media can provide all sorts of opportunities for talking about healthy relationships in ways that won't put kids on the defensive.

## BEING A GOOD ROLE MODEL

Whatever your role in young people's lives, keep in mind you have to be a good role model with your own social media use. One recent study found that parents post, on average, about 900 photos of their kids before they are five! There's even a term now – sharenting – to describe the overuse of social media by parents to share images and posts of their kids.

To be a good role model, always ask young people before you post photos of them. Talk to them about who might see the photos and how long they could last online.

## PICKING UP THE PIECES: COMFORTING AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

It's important that we don't just deal with these issues when a problem comes up, but do everything we can to make girls and young women more resilient in the face of online risks. Resiliency is, to a large extent, what determines whether the harms we suffer leave us with scars or just a bruise. It's essential that as we're trying to keep girls safe and help them get over their negative experiences, we don't unintentionally make them less resilient. To do this, we have to make sure we're modeling the attitudes that foster resiliency:

- Negative experiences don't reflect who we are (in other words, bad things happening to you doesn't mean you're a bad person).
- Negative experiences are only one specific part of our lives (something going wrong doesn't mean your life is ruined, even if it may seem that way at the time).
- Negative experiences are temporary and changeable (some will pass, and many can be fixed).

Viewing your life in this way doesn't always come naturally. Most of us will have to learn how to do it by reframing our reaction, from one in which we are at the mercy of others to one in which we are in control of how we react to our experiences. We need to make sure girls know they always have options for making things better, even if that's just talking it out with

someone they trust. We also need to teach them how to recognize when they're in a "hot" emotional state by being aware of their breathing, their heart rate, and tension in their muscles – something we may not notice when we're using digital devices – and cool themselves down before doing anything. This is also an important habit for keeping drama from escalating! We've included a handout called "Looking After Yourself: Five Tips for Keeping Stress Under Control" at the end of this guide that you can give to girls in your life to help them learn how to cool down.

Resiliency has also been connected to a feeling of being connected to others and a sense of being in control of your life. Put together, these characteristics show how important it is to be available for help and to avoid making girls feel scared and helpless (for example, by exaggerating the risks of being online) and instead make sure they feel that they have the tools to deal with whatever negative experiences they face and that they have trusted adults they can count on if things go wrong.

To foster resiliency, we have to use the same tools and platforms that the girls in our lives are using. Adults who are more frequent Internet users are more confident in giving advice to kids, and are more likely to suggest proactive solutions like the ones we've listed in this guide rather than restricting or cutting back online access.

We can also model resilience by talking to girls about times when we've made mistakes online, or faced challenges, and talk about how we dealt with it. You don't have to have all the answers – what's more important is communicating the idea that you have had problems, too, that you worked your way through them, and they eventually passed.

# CONVERSATION STARTERS

These questions can be helpful in starting a conversation with the girls and young women in your life about their online experiences, as well as finding out what issues they're experiencing and what strategies they're using to deal with them.

- What social networks are you on (if any)?
- What questions do you ask yourself before you post or share something? (Do they think about what might happen if the wrong people see it? About how it might make other people feel?)
- What would you do if somebody asked you for a photo that you didn't want to send, or asked you to share a photo somebody sent you?
- What would you do if somebody posted something that made you mad or scared? (Do they know how to recognize feeling mad or scared when they're online? Suggest taking a break and talking things over in person.)
- What would you do if you witnessed someone being harassed online? (Remind her that she can always do something: one of the most effective responses is just to contact the victim privately and let them know you care about them.)
- What would you do if you received a sext from someone other than the person who's in it? (Make sure she knows that it's never okay to share a private photo like a sext without permission.)
- Do you feel like you have to look a certain way in photos that you post? Have you ever gotten negative comments about photos? (Remind them that like pictures in magazines, social media photos are carefully posed and often manipulated.)
- What are some of the tricks you use for making pictures look good? What are things you can do with just the camera and what are things you can do with editing software or with tools the social network gives you (filters, etc.)? Do you think your friends do those before posting their photos?
- Do you feel like you know what rules you should follow when you're online?
- Do you know what to do if things go really wrong? (Make sure they know that you won't "freak out" if they come to you with a problem.)
- Help me set up an account on the social networks you use and show me how to…
  - Create a strong password
  - Change my default privacy settings

- · Limit who can see a post or a photo
- · Tag and de-tag a post or a photo
- · Report someone else's post or photo to the people who run the site
- · Block someone from contacting me
- Who at school or near home can you go to for help/support with these issues?

## LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF: FIVE TIPS FOR KEEPING STRESS UNDER CONTROL

Life can be tough sometimes but it's helpful to remember that situations and emotions are always changing. When it's hard, make space to honour your feelings and to take care of yourself in a way that works for you.

Here are five ways to keep your stress levels within your control that are free and easy:

1. Use these quick stress busters throughout the day

Relax Your Shoulders

- Make small circles with your shoulders

- Lower your shoulders and let the tension go

Take a Deep Breath

- Take a slow deep breath in through your nose

- As you sigh the air out through your mouth, tell yourself, "Let that tension go"

Make Your Thoughts Positive

- Mentally say "Stop" to stop the chain of negative thoughts

- Think of something positive or at least neutral. For example, count to 10

2. Let yourself feel your emotions and vent them

Let your feelings out in a positive way before they build up and cause health problems. You can put away your device, close your laptop … and vent – scream without making a sound, sing, walk, exercise, yell, cry, pound a pillow, cuddle a pet … find something that helps you unwind

3. Pamper yourself for free

Find a way to feel good without spending a cent – massage your tense areas, relax in the bath or shower, take a nap, enjoy your favourite treat, listen to music or read, get outside and enjoy nature …

4. Take a mini vacation or spa day in your mind

Sit still and close your eyes. Imagine a beautiful, relaxing place with all its sounds and smells. Then picture yourself stepping into that place and let yourself escape.

5. Focus on positives and your strengths to stay hopeful

Look for a silver lining and be hopeful

*Taken from 99 Ways to Chillax and Bounce Back. Copyright Dr. C.K. Andrade, 2015, All Rights Reserved. @drckandrade*

**Disclaimer:** *This is not medical advice. Consult a health care professional if you are concerned about your signs of chronic stress or other symptoms.*

## ABOUT YWCA CANADA AND PROJECT SHIFT

YWCA Canada is the country's oldest and largest women's multi-service organization. Our 32 Member Associations serve women and girls in nine provinces and two territories. YWCA Canada is the nation's single largest provider of shelter to women and children fleeing violence, the second largest provider of childcare services, and an active member of the World YWCA. For more information visit www.ywcacanada.ca, find us on Twitter @YWCA_Canada or at www.facebook.com/ywcacanada.

Project Shift: Creating a Safer Digital World for Young Women is a national multi-year project, led by YWCA Canada and funded by the Status of Women Canada. YWCA Canada convened cross-sector stakeholders to work toward systemic change by developing and implementing strategies that prevent and eliminate cyberviolence against young women and girls. Project Shift establishes the need for a gender lens to understand violence online and makes recommendations for a range of public and private actors, from educational institutions to parents and ICTs to counsellors and police.

## ABOUT MEDIASMARTS

MediaSmarts is a Canadian not-for-profit centre for digital and media literacy. Its vision is that young people have the critical thinking skills to engage with media as active and informed digital citizens. MediaSmarts offers hundreds of digital and media literacy resources for teachers, parents and educators on its website, mediasmarts.ca.