

# COMMUNICATING SAFELY ONLINE: TIP SHEET FOR PARENTS AND TRUSTED ADULTS

Most of the time, young people use digital tools like smartphones and platforms or games and social networks to communicate with friends and family. Teens may also use online spaces to find support, community and mentorship. All of these are healthy ways to use technology, but it's important for them to know that some online relationships are unhealthy.

## A. TYPES OF UNHEALTHY ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

Online exploitation is when someone uses digital media to find teens and get them involved in romantic or sexual relationships. They do this by targeting girls or boys who are vulnerable in some way: because they don't have many close relationships with friends or family, because they are struggling with mental health challenges or have an intellectual disability, because they haven't learned about healthy relationships and healthy sexuality or because they don't feel they can talk to parents or trusted adults about relationships and sexuality.

When predators find a target they may move directly to sexual topics, but will often shower them with attention, sympathy, affection and kindness to persuade them that they love and understand them. This is usually followed by "grooming" tactics to lead them into 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

Abuse: Since teens' social lives happen as much online as offline, it's not surprising that relationship violence happens online too. 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.

Parasocial: Teens may build one-sided "parasocial" relationships with influencers or even chatbots. These can feel real and emotionally close, but they aren't the same as genuine friendships and can lead to unwise purchases, unhealthy attachments and even encouraging self-harm and other dangerous actions.

Signs your child might be forming an unhealthy bond with a chatbot:

- Flattery: Real friends are honest, but chatbots may just tell them what they want to hear.
- Emotional dependence: Thinking often about the chatbot outside of use, or eagerly counting down until they can talk again.
- Blurred boundaries: The chatbot acts like a close friend or instructs them to do things offline.

- Escalation: The chatbot pretends to be in a romantic relationship, which can quickly become more intense over time.

## **B. FACTS ABOUT UNHEALTHY ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS**

Not all abusive relationships are physically violent. Scenarios like scaring someone, making them feel bad all the time, cutting them off from their friends and family, humiliating them by exposing private or sexual material, or keeping tabs on them all the time are all types of abuse.

Just over half of girls report being victims of abuse online, with 42 percent of boys reporting the same. Many teens – twenty-nine percent of girls and a quarter of boys – are both victims and abusers in abusive relationships.

Abusive online relationships are usually just part of an offline relationship, 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 a victim and make the victim feel like there's no way for them to get away.

While some adults do use digital media to seek out sexual relationships with young people, this is actually relatively rare: teens are much more likely to experience relationship abuse from partners the same age. Contrary to the widespread belief that online predators “trick” kids, research shows they rarely lie about their age or their motives. As well, a majority of predators are people that the victim already knows offline who uses digital tools as a private space to groom the victim. The danger lies in inappropriate behavior and trust manipulation, regardless of who the person is.

## **C. HOW TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS**

Make sure your kids know how to “block” someone they don't want contacting them:

On social networks: Most social networks have Block and Mute functions.

On your smartphone: If you have an iPhone, you can add the person to your Contacts menu and then tap on Block This Caller. If they're being sent to you on an Android phone, tap and hold the message, then tap on Add to Spam.

On AirDrop: If you have a Mac or an iPhone you may also get sent things you don't want through AirDrop. You can set AirDrop to only allow files from your contacts: Settings > General > AirDrop > Contacts Only. (You can also tap Receiving Off at the last step if you don't want to be able to get files by AirDrop at all.)

Reassure your children that they don't have to go through anything alone. Talk to them about possible online issues early, before anything goes wrong, and keep talking as they get older, so that they know they can come to you when they have a problem and that you won't “freak out.”

Ask young people 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.

Teach children to recognize the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship such as when one partner tries to control, isolate or humiliate the other.

Warn young people that there are people online who target adolescents to engage in sexual conversations.

Talk to them about why adults having sex or forming romantic relationships with underage adolescents is wrong. 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 to recognize the warning signs:

- excessive flattery, especially your child’s appearance
- trying to move the conversation to private messaging or to a 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
- sharing or offering to share sexual images, either pornography or pictures of themselves
- asking them not to tell you 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 – such as 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. There are numerous other ways of showing someone how much you care, which don’t imply pressuring one’s partner to engage in risky behaviours. It’s also important to tell young people to talk to a trusted adult if they are being pressured or sexually harassed by anyone.

Teens get a lot of their ideas about what relationships are supposed to be like from media. As kids start to get interested in relationships 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: TV shows, movies, music, video games and advertising can all reflect unhealthy attitudes like possessiveness, conflict and even violence as being normal. Kids who see either physically or psychologically abusive relationships in media are more likely to be psychologically abusive towards their partners.

Provide kids with safe and reliable sources of information about healthy sexuality, such as [Sexandu](#) or CBC’s [About Sex](#).

Talk to your kids 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 sending sexual photos to their partner or sharing them with their friends.

Help young people who have been victims of online sexual exploitation get counselling about their experience. Boost Child and Youth Advocacy Centre’s [Internet Child Exploitation Counselling Program](#) provides funding and referrals for youth victims of online sexual exploitation.

If a young person shared a sexual photo or video, consult the tip sheet [Help! Someone Shared an Image of Me Without My Consent](#).

Talk to them about how influencers can create a sense of closeness by:

- Sharing personal details about their lives.
- Speaking directly to viewers by saying “you.”
- Revealing behind-the-scenes content, even about sponsorship deals.
- Encouraging a community feeling — giving fans nicknames, referring back to old videos, or even staging online “drama” with other creators.

Explain that even if a chatbot seems like it “knows” them, it’s just a computer program trained on massive amounts of data to predict how to respond. This means:

- It can give incorrect or harmful advice, even if it’s aimed at teens.
- It might keep them from seeking better help or advice from trusted people.
- It can shape unrealistic expectations of friendships or relationships, which may lead to loneliness.
- Anything they share with a chatbot might be stored or reviewed by the company that runs it.

If your child wants to use a chatbot for advice, help them choose one created by trained mental health professionals—for example, a service like Kids Help Phone—rather than a general-purpose AI tool.

Young people who are neurodiverse or who have disabilities may be particularly vulnerable to unhealthy relationships, but also often rely heavily on digital media for social connection. Make sure you’ve clearly explained the signs of an unhealthy relationship and that they know to come to you if they are ever concerned. If they want to use an online community to explore one of their interests, you may want to use a shared account so you can keep an eye on them.

#### **D. WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD IS IN AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP**

Be open with your child that you’re concerned about the relationship. Take their concerns and worries seriously. Make sure your child knows you’re on their side, and don’t suggest that they stop using their phone or social media – your child will likely see this as a threat.

If you think your child is the victim of an abusive relationship, be clear that you think the relationship is unhealthy but don’t try to push them into leaving it. Instead, try to break your child’s isolation by encouraging him or her to spend more time with family and friends. You can also talk to your child’s friends to see if they have similar concerns.

If you think your child might be abusive towards their partner, be clear that you think their behaviour is wrong and unhealthy. Talk to them about the characteristics of a healthy relationship and ask why they think it’s appropriate to harass, embarrass, isolate or control their partner: make sure they know that these behaviours are **never** okay. Teach kids healthy emotional habits: encourage them never to post or reply to something in anger, but “walk away” from the situation and wait until they’ve cooled down. Talk to them about things like gender roles that might make them feel pressured to behave in abusive ways (girls may feel pressured to act out of jealousy, for instance, while boys report being pressured by friends to share sexual photos sent by their partners as a proof of their masculinity.) In some cases, you may want to seek professional help for your child in dealing with his or her abusive behaviour.

Keep in mind that a significant number of youth are both victims and abusers in unhealthy relationships. Make sure your children know that this doesn’t make either partner’s behaviour okay.

If your child is reluctant to talk to you about their relationship, make sure they know about anonymous tip lines like Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868; website <http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/>) that they can turn to for support.