Internet Safety Tips by Age: 14-17

Adolescence is a period of great change. It's a stage where teenagers, once dependent on their families, are now becoming more independent and taking steps towards adulthood. This is also when teens are developing their own sense of morality, as they try to find their own identity and experiment in their relationships with others. Even though teens start to physically resemble adults, their brains will not be fully developed until they are 20 or 25 years old, especially their frontal lobe – the part that allows them to control their impulses.

One of the biggest emotional challenges of the teen years is developing autonomy. This includes starting to tap friends and mentors outside the family for day-to-day support, perspectives and ideas. The Internet also becomes an important source of information, with teens much more likely than younger kids to go online to look for info on sensitive topics such as mental and physical health, sexuality, and relationship problems.

Teens are also using networked devices to cultivate their personal identity and carve out personal space: over 60 percent of teens in grades 9-11 have pretended to be older to register on adult websites, and over 50 percent have pretended to be someone else to protect their privacy online.

Learning how to manage risk – deciding what to engage in and how to minimize possible negative consequences – is a major part of adolescence. And although many teens actively do this, for example they are very diligent about managing their personal content and photos on social networking pages and use privacy settings to block unwanted individuals, the impulsivity and sexual exploration that are common during the teen years can lead to compromising photos and messages being forwarded to others.

14- to 17-year olds:

- are sensitive to what they see as the values of their society, including their peers, their family and the mass media
- download music and apps, watch videos and movies online
- rely heavily on texting and social networking sites to communicate with family and friends
- are much more likely than younger kids to sleep with their cell phones
- have significantly fewer household rules about going online than younger kids
- are highly confident they know how to protect themselves online
- are considerably more likely than younger kids to say that downloading music, TV shows or movies illegally is not a big deal.
- are passionate about video games (boys in particular).

- use multiple search engines and a number of different strategies to find and authenticate online information.

- are likely to have bought things online

- are more likely than younger kids to share passwords with friends and boyfriends/girlfriends.

- are more likely to break the rules and visit sites with scenes of violence, gambling or pornography

- are much more likely than younger kids to behave meanly or cruelly – and be mean and cruel to others – online. They are also more likely than younger kids to report being troubled if they are targets of cyberbullying

- are interested in sex and romantic relationships which can push them towards risky behaviour, like making romantic friends online – and accepting invitations to meet these online friends in person – or sending their girlfriend or boyfriend sexually explicit text messages or photos of themselves (sexting)

- are much more likely than younger kids to encounter sexist or racist content online.

Safety Tips

General Supervision

- Continue to declare your child's bedroom a 'tech-free' zone at night: over half of students in Grade 11 say they sleep with their phones so they don't miss any messages.

- Keep online activities – whether on laptops, tablets or family computers – in common family areas where you can easily monitor what your kids are doing. In addition to facilitating supervision, this also invites more opportunities for sharing.

Managing Online Spaces

- Be aware of how much information your teen is revealing, and to whom, on their social networking pages. Make sure they are aware of and are applying privacy settings and are familiar with the reporting mechanisms on these sites.

- Be aware of and visit the websites that your teen frequents.

- As opposed to imposing hard and fast 'rules', have ongoing, open discussions with your teen about your expectations and family values relating to use of networked technologies. Be prepared to 'walk the walk', and not just 'talk the talk': model the attitudes and behaviours that you expect to see from them.

- Frame these conversations around rights and principles; for example, we all have a right to privacy and to not be harassed online, as well as a responsibility to take care with what we post and share with others.

- Keep these conversations respectful; find teachable moments (such as stories in the news or your kids' own experiences) to broach specific issues.

- Let your teen know that you are there for them if things go wrong and that you will work with them to find a solution. If something does happen, don't over-react.

Building Safety Skills

- Help your teen contextualize serious online issues such as sexting, cyberbullying, and illegal downloading – and build resilience -- by emphasizing that despite perceptions that large numbers of youth are doing these things, in reality the numbers are much smaller than we think.

- Encourage your teen to practice empathy online by getting into the habit of thinking about – and asking permission from -- anyone else who might be in a photo or video they want to post, tag or pass along.

- With college and university applications looming, get your teen in the habit of reviewing her or her presence online, to make sure they are reflected in positive ways.

- Provide strategies for handling online conflict in non-confrontational ways.

- Help your teen build internal 'pause buttons' to counter impulsive behaviour: if they are feeling emotional or online conversations are escalating, encourage them to step away from their computer or cell phone before posting or sending anything.

- Because teens frame much online meanness as 'just joking around', talk with them about the fine lines between humour and cruelty.

- Talk about healthy relationships and how to recognize the signs when someone may be seeking to abuse or exploit them.

- Make sure your teen understands that it is never okay to pressure someone to send or share a nude, semi-nude or sexy photo, or to share a photo like that with anyone else.

- Talk to your teens about online pornography and direct them to good sites about health and sexuality.

- Insist that your teen comes to you first if they want to meet an "online friend" in person.

- Teach your teens to provide only minimal personal information when filling out registration forms and personal profiles or entering online contests.

- Encourage ethical online behaviour – and protect your computers from malware – by talking to your teen about respecting copyright, especially when downloading music and video files. (Kids this age are less worried about getting in trouble and more about fitting in with the values of their social group, so it's best to approach this as an issue of showing respect for artists.)

- Make sure your kids know about the many safe, legitimate sources of music, video and other media online.

- Make sure your teens check with you before making financial transactions online, including ordering, buying or selling items.

- Discuss gambling and its potential risks and remind your teen that it is illegal for minors to gamble online.