

Keeping Kids Safe Online: A Guide for Parents

While the internet can be an exciting place for children to connect with others and learn, studies show that online access also comes with risks, which include inappropriate content, cyberbullying, online predators, pornography exposure, and exploitation. Parents need to be aware of what their kids see and hear online, who they are meeting, and what they are sharing about themselves.

Talk with your kids, use tools to protect them, and keep a close eye on their activities. Be an example for your kids online. Limit your own screen time, be mindful of what you are sharing, and be respectful when interacting online.

Pornography Exposure & Young People

Pornography exposure online is extremely prevalent. Kids are only several clicks away from pornography anytime they are online, with the average age of exposure being 9-12 years old. [One in three kids say they've seen explicit, hardcore porn by age 12](#), which equates to roughly 25 million children in the U.S. alone! In the majority of cases, they've stumbled upon it accidentally.



Pornographic content is misleading, degrading, and objectifying, and often overtly violent. This is a dangerous combination that shapes kids' early perceptions of consent, sexual violence, gender equality, sexuality, and intimate relationships.

Porn undermines the whole-person health of young people. It impacts every facet of their developmental wellness: social, emotional, cognitive, and physical.

For more information on the harms of pornography, see [Culture Reframed's Fact Sheet on the effects of porn on young people](#).

Teaching Safe and Responsible Online Behavior

While blocking objectionable material is important, it's imperative to teach your kids safe and responsible online behavior and frequently monitor their online and social media use.

Here are some basic guidelines to share with your kids and help them stay safe online:

- Never post or trade personal pictures. Some photos have locations attached to them, which may pose a threat when sent to an unsafe person.
- Never reveal personal information, such as your address, phone number, or school name or location.
- Use only a screen name and don't share passwords (other than with parents).
- Never agree to get together in person with anyone met online without parental approval and/or supervision.
- Never respond to a threatening email, message, post, or text.
- Always tell a parent or other trusted adult about any communication, conversation, or content that was uncomfortable, scary, or hurtful.
- Ask for help if anyone online asks for a naked image or video.



Basic Guidelines for Parental Supervision

- Have short, honest conversations frequently. See [Culture Reframed's free courses for parents](#) and conversation starters.
- Spend time online together to teach your kids appropriate behavior.
- Keep the computer, smartphone, or tablet in a common area (not in bedrooms) where you can watch and monitor its use. Also, monitor time spent on devices.
- For specific guidance on social media, apps, gaming, movies, and more, check out [Common Sense Media](#).
- Charge all devices in a shared location overnight. Do not allow devices to be in the child's bedroom at night.
- Bookmark kids' favorite sites for easy access.
- Check your kids' device privacy settings and parental control tools with an app such as [Canopy](#).
- Check your credit card and phone bills for unfamiliar account charges.
- Find out what, if any, online protection is offered by your child's school, friends' homes, or any place where kids could use a computer without your supervision.
- Let your kids know that if an adult online asks them to keep secrets, they should always come to you.
- Take your child seriously if they report an uncomfortable online exchange.
- If your child discloses anyone sending, viewing, or distributing child sexual abuse materials (or child pornography) online, report it to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children online through the CyberTipline.
- If your child has shared a sexualized image or video, you can take steps to get it taken down [here](#).



Risk of Online Predators

Trends are showing that online predators are using social media apps and websites where kids interact and pose as a child or teen looking to make a “new friend.” Their goal is to gain trust and ask the child to exchange personal information, such as their address and phone number, or even pressure the child to send them nude photos and videos. This is known as grooming.

Signs that a child may be targeted by a predator include:

- Spending long hours online, especially at night
- Receiving phone calls or video calls from people they don't know
- Receiving unsolicited gifts in the mail or via online services
- Using precocious sexual language that is not age-appropriate
- Turning off the computer or other device when you walk into the room
- Withdrawing from family life and regular activities
- Showing reluctance to discuss online activities or being evasive when asked questions

The FBI recently put out a warning that “sextortion” is on the rise. This occurs when a child sends a nude photo or video to someone (who usually poses as a peer) and the predator starts to blackmail the child for money. It’s imperative to talk with children and teens about this trend and remind them to never respond or send money or pictures of themselves if they are threatened online.

Online Protection Tools

Online tools let you control your kids’ access to certain online material and help protect them from online predators. Here are some ideas on [how to monitor and protect your kid’s devices](#). Parental control apps, including [Canopy](#), are another option.

Remember that tools to protect kids online are helpful but not as important as engaged conversations with them.

