Today's Parent

6 THINGS PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT KEEPING THEIR TEENS SAFE ONLINE

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If TikTok memes and tutorials have taken over your dinner table conversation—when you can get your teen to look up from their phone, that is—you are not alone. A full 87 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds in Canada use social media and 76 percent of them prefer to get their video content online rather than a traditional method, according to a survey by Media Technology Monitor.

As parents, it can be hard to let our teens embrace the world of apps, social media and online content. In an effort to protect them, our minds often turn to the worst. What if they stumble on something inappropriate for their age? Could they be bullied? Or pressured to post things that could cause them harm later on?

Deep breaths, parents. Social media, entertainment platforms and other content apps can be a positive aspect of your kid's life. With some help from these tips, you will help your teen stay safe—and thrive— online.

Know the landscape: It's hard to protect your kids from the unknown. That's why experts suggest downloading and getting accounts for the apps they use. "You need to become familiar and understand what you're working with so that when you have conversations with your families, it makes sense to everyone," says Tracy Elizabeth, global policy lead for minor safety at TikTok. "Learn the rules, learn the tools and learn how to respond when or if things start to feel a little sticky."

Understand the risks: Over the years, parents' primary concerns about online media have changed. "In the past decade, we've seen it go from stranger danger to cyberbullying, to misinformation to screen time," says Matthew Johnson, director of education at Canadian non-profit MediaSmarts. But Johnson explains that in most cases, these individual risks are overblown and instead it's much more complex and interrelated. "For example, we found that young people's attitudes toward gender, and whether or not they believed in traditional gender stereotypes, have a strong connection with whether or not they'll share a sext that was sent to them without the sender's consent," says Johnson.

Use the built-in tools: You may be surprised to learn that there are a number of tools built-in to apps and phones that automatically protect their younger users and that there are more you or your kid can access if needed. For example, on TikTok, if you're under 16 your account is automatically set to private, which means only people who your teen approves will be able to see their content, says Elizabeth. The platform also has Family Pairing, which links a parent's account to their teen's and, once enabled, allows parents and teens to customize their safety settings based on individual needs.

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If too much screen time is a concern if your family, you can show your kid how to set limits using the tools on their phone. You should also make sure your teen knows how to identify, block or report videos that make them uncomfortable or they think is inappropriate on the apps they're using.

Keep tabs—but don't spy: It's hard to strike the right balance between overbearing and out-of-the-loop when it comes to teens and their online presence.

Unfortunately, there's no right answer here, as every family situation and dynamic is different. Some people, especially when their tweens and teens are just starting out on their digital journey or new to social media, choose to follow their accounts. "This is a good way of reminding them that nothing is 100 percent private online," says Johnson. TikTok creator, parent and TV personality Sangita Patel agrees and follows her daughter on the platform. "It's making sure we have an open dialogue," she admits. "They trust me enough to follow them, and they know I respect them enough to give them their space." Another strategy is to keep their login and password information in a safe place, but tell them you won't use it unless you're concerned for their well-being.

Whatever you do, don't spy on them secretly. "It really hurts trust. If something goes wrong, they're not going to come to you for help," says Johnson.

Keep an open conversation: Experts say the conversation around social media, privacy, and online safety should start young and be ongoing. "As soon as they can answer the question in a meaningful way, we suggest you ask your kids before sharing photos of them on any platform, because that really models the idea of respecting privacy," says Johnson. Then, when your kid starts to ask for social media accounts, ask them what they plan to do with it, who they know that's already using it, if they know how to block people or control who sees what they're posting. "Putting them in the position of the expert empowers them, but it also makes sure that they do understand how to do these really important things to keep themselves safe," explains Johnson.

Find the fun: Online content spills over into our regular lives every day, and you can seize these opportunities to have fun with your kids—whether it's learning the newest TikTok science experiment, laughing over a viral video or having a heated debate over the merits of the latest emerging pop star. Teens want our trust and we want to know it's a two-way street—what better way to build it than bonding over one of the biggest parts of their lives.