Keeping Children and Youth Safe While Connected:
Online Safety Tips for Parents & Caregivers

Children and youth are spending more time online than ever before. The internet can be a positive and beneficial tool. It allows them to:

- Utilize resources for learning and education.
- Connect with their peers and loved ones.
- Engage in entertainment (i.e., gaming or streaming music).
- Express themselves and build or develop their identity (Holloway et. al.; Uhls et. al.).

However, there are also dangers associated with internet and social media use. In a comparison of multiple research studies, it was found that for youth aged 12-16:

Approximately 1 in 5 experience unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material while 1 in 9 experience online sexual solicitation (Madigan et. al.).

These risks can result in negative outcomes for children and youth such as anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem (Uhls et. al.). Additionally, online situations can be even riskier for younger children, who are just starting to develop the reasoning skills needed to help them navigate the internet safely (Holloway et. al.).

○ Most Common Online Risks for Children and Youth

- Exposure to adult content and sexually explicit materials.
- Exposure to and production of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).
- Cyberbullying, or any bullying or harassment that is happening online.
- Sexting/Sextortion – the sharing and receiving of sexually explicit messages.
- Online Enticement/Exploitation – which can include or lead to human trafficking. Predators, grooming, online gaming, and social media applications play a large role in this risk.
- Phishing/Unsafe Downloads – scamming others into sharing personal or financial information.

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⬤ Tips for Keeping Children and Youth Safe Online

- Keep computers/devices in **open areas** (especially for younger students).
- **Set rules** around cell phone/device usage (i.e., how many hours per day or no gaming until homework is complete).
- **Create "device-free" times** such as during dinner or an hour before bedtime.
- **Model** healthy device/online usage.
- **Encourage healthy online habits** such as setting privacy settings and never exchanging personal information, passwords, or private photos.
- **Monitor online/gaming activity** by setting parental controls, checking browsing history, reviewing friend lists, and possibly even considering digital monitoring software and applications.
- **Have conversations** with children and youth on a regular basis regarding expected behavior online. Start these conversations as soon as your child begins using a device.
- **Connect with your child's school** about online safety education and seek opportunities to reinforce or extend any messaging at home.

⬤ Tips for Talking with Your Children about Online Safety

- **Carve out time each day** to talk and engage with your child, as well as taking advantage of opportunities when your child is trying to communicate with you.
- Put your devices down and give them your **full attention**. Being present, empathic, and actively listening will show your child you care about what they have to say and will help to encourage future conversations.
- Have discussions on privacy and safety (both on and offline) on a **regular** basis, which will provide the needed repetition that will help children learn these important messages. Conversations on safety can begin with children as young as three years old, such as with educating about body safety.
- **Use everyday opportunities** to talk about your child's online activity and show your interest. Be calm, curious and nonjudgmental, which will signal to your child that they can confide in you and can come to you when there is a problem.
- Share **warning signs** of online tricks or lures such as a person steering the conversation toward sexual themes, gift giving, asking to keep the relationship a secret, or trying to move the conversation to a more private application.
- Know the warning signs you can look for as a parent, such as: your child becoming secretive about their online activity, getting overly angry or upset when they can't go online, receiving gifts or packages from someone you don't know, or withdrawing from friends or family.
- Consider using a strengths-based approach when talking with your child to further build a positive connection and relationship.

⬤ How to Get Help or Report Suspicious Activity

If your child has experienced a traumatic event, in addition to involving law enforcement and other professionals such as your child's pediatrician, you may wish to consider partnering with your child's school counselor or other support professional to learn of supports available to your child from within the school.

📞   There are many toll-free hotlines and helplines that can be contacted for help, crisis intervention, and resources.

If your child or a young person you know has been involved in a suspicious online incident, you can submit a report to:
- The NJ Computer Crimes Task Force Hotline | 1-888-648-6007 (for those living in New Jersey).
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)'s CyberTipline | 1-800-THE-LOST.
- Your local law enforcement agency.
- Your local FBI field office and can also do so by submitting a tip online.

⬤ Additional Information/Resources to Explore

For additional information, resources, and a complete list of references, please visit the NJDOE Child Abuse, Neglect, & Missing Children webpage to access the full *Online Safety Guide for Parents & Caregivers*.