CYBER SAFETY

Helpful tips for parents from Common Sense Media*

How do I monitor my teen online without "spying"?

There are no one-size-fits-all solutions for how to supervise kids' online exploits, because every kid is different. When it comes to media and technology, you want to establish a relationship in which your kids will come to you if something awkward, inappropriate, or uncomfortable happens online. Talking to them nonjudgmentally and encouraging them to share the apps and websites they love will show them that your interest goes beyond policing their activities.

Most kids use technology and social media responsibly. And, having grown up in a world with unprecedented access to media and technology, many kids are incredibly sophisticated users. Still, their technical savvy often far exceeds their judgment. As parents, it's our responsibility to set rules and establish consequences for misuse.

Mandatory measures -- such as demanding kids' passwords or insisting they friend you on Facebook -- tend to backfire. Kids can get around any crackdowns you impose. If you're really having problems, then look into monitoring programs for their online accounts. And don't forget that you are your kids' digital role model, so let them see the kind of behavior you want them to emulate.

What should I do if my teenager is cyberbullied in an online game?

First, determine if it's real cyberbullying or just heated trash talk. Here are some examples of gameplay behavior that could cross the line into cyberbullying:

"Griefing." Repeatedly harming a player's avatar or placing the avatar in harmful situations that make it hard to play the game. This behavior is often directed at new players by more experienced players.

"Trolling." Intentionally trying to frustrate, anger, and offend other players. Trolls may pretend to be someone they're not or say inflammatory things.

Invading privacy. Using personal information (such as an address, a phone number, or even friends' names) in direct threats.

Stalking. Everywhere your kid goes in a game, the bully is there -- often with private information on your kid.

Ganging up. Enlisting other players to surround a player and intimidate and scare him or her.

If your kid is the target of hostile online play, he or she should block the offending player, flag the behavior, and report the player. Nearly every reputable online game (and virtual worlds for younger kids) has community-reporting tools that you can use to call out behavior that violates the site's terms of service.

What is digital harassment?

Digital harassment is the use of cell phones, social networks, and other communications devices to bully, threaten, and aggressively badger someone. Although it's a form of cyberbullying, digital harassment is a bit different because it usually takes place between two people in a romantic relationship.

Parents can support their teens by understanding that relationships these days are often played out both online and offline -- and kids need their parents' guidance in establishing appropriate boundaries. Young love is complicated enough without the added pressure of constant access and public scrutiny. The tips below can help you help your kids navigate these murky waters so they can avoid digital drama for themselves and their friends.

Start a discussion. Your teen may not tell you if harassment is happening directly to him or her. But you can bring it up when you talk about online safety and responsible behavior. Tell kids about resources such as That's Not Cool and the Love is Respect.

Let them know you're always there for them. Remind teens often that you're always available to talk. While you're at it, put in a plug for the school counselor, a teacher, or even a friend's parent. Knowing that they have a trusted adult to talk to may encourage teens to open up.

Help them set boundaries. Tell teens never to do anything that's outside their comfort zones, such as sharing passwords or sending sexual photos. (It never hurts to reiterate that anything you send can travel far and wide.)

Take action. If you find out your teen has been threatened or blackmailed, bring the issue to his or her school administrators or law enforcement. Although you never want to overreact, your child's safety is the priority.

Is there a connection between cyberbullying and suicide?

Several teen suicides have been linked to cyberbullying, but the reality is more complicated. According to a report from the American Academy of Pediatrics, cyberbullying is rarely the sole factor contributing to suicide. In cases where suicide is linked with cyberbullying, other factors exist, such as offline bullying and mental health issues such as depression.

Bullying in general has negative repercussions, especially for kids who are struggling with a variety of issues. And, unfortunately, both online and offline bullying is pretty prevalent, though suicide attempts are fairly rare. Certain types of social media -- such as question sites that allow kids to pose questions anonymously -- seem to attract destructive behavior.

What should you do if you're concerned about your kid? Look for warning signs. Take note of your kid's attitudes, behaviors, and moods. The tween and teen years can be rocky; probe a little to determine whether something more serious is going on. Talk to your kid about her social media experiences, help her set limits on how much time she spends online and who her online friends are, and get her involved in offline activities. Steer her away from sites that aren't positive and productive. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline offers comprehensive information and counseling.