

Parent Tip Sheet: Guiding Your Child To Navigate Social Media Safely & Confidently

Social media often plays a significant role in many young people's lives, providing opportunities for connection and learning. By understanding both its benefits and challenges, we can better support them in navigating it safely and confidently.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S BENEFITS



CONNECTION (WITH CAVEATS)

- While social media connects people, it can also lead to relationships that feel less meaningful or involve encounters with imposters—people who may pretend to be someone they're not.
- Understanding the difference between online 'friends' and in-person connections is important, as online content is often curated to show an idealized version of people's lives, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy or FOMO (fear of missing out).
- Help them curate their online circles to prioritize positive interactions.
- Encourage them to reflect on how they engage with others online and to practice good 'netiquette' (online etiquette) to help create positive and respectful digital spaces.



EXPOSURE (WITH CRITICAL EVALUATION)

- Social media algorithms curate a vast amount of content, which can sometimes feel overwhelming. Encourage your child to consider ways to focus on the topics that matter most to them.
- Teach them to identify biased or manipulative content. Is something "too good to be true"? Is someone pressuring them to do something quickly or in secret?
- Discuss the importance of intentionally finding different viewpoints and perspectives online.
- Remind them to come to you with questions or concerns.



VOICE (WITH RESPONSIBILITY)

- Advocacy is powerful, but it requires critical thinking. They should be thinking about how what they say or share can impact themselves and others.
- Guide them in verifying information before sharing and spreading it.
- Discuss the potential risks to their privacy and safety when participating in online activism, such as having their personal information exposed (doxxing) or becoming a target of harassment.



LEARNING (WITH DISCERNMENT)

- Information is abundant on social media platforms, but quality and accuracy varies. Help them identify credible sources and avoid spreading misinformation.
- Explain how AI can create false information, even in video or audio format.



FUN (WITH BALANCE)

- Spending time online can be engaging and meaningful, but it's important to balance it with offline experiences and connections. Encourage offline hobbies and social interactions alongside online engagement.

UNDERSTANDING THE RISKS

PRIVACY

Children need to understand the permanence of online information and its impact on their future reputation.

Discuss privacy settings and the risks of oversharing. Have them review their online presence and remove any personal information that is not necessary or posts that may embarrass them in the future. Explain how data collection works, and how it can be used. Remind them never to share their full name, home address, phone number, school information, birthdate, banking/credit card information and passwords on social media.

MISINFORMATION AND THE “ECHO CHAMBER”

Algorithms create personalized feeds, reinforcing existing biases and exposing them to extreme content. With AI influencing this process, it's more important than ever to stay mindful of how we engage with information online

Teach them to question everything online and verify information. Encourage them to seek out diverse perspectives – even those they disagree with – and show them how to recognize AI-generated content. Unsure how to do that? You can learn this together.

PASSIVE CONSUMPTION

Endless scrolling triggers dopamine release, which can lead to unhealthy habits, addiction and sometimes to negative self-comparison.

Set time limits and encourage mindful scrolling. Help youth identify emotional triggers and develop coping mechanisms. Use app settings to limit time spent on specific apps. Consider sharing how difficult it is for you to do this, too.

A critical part of engaging youth in technology is ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to be responsible and empowered online. Actua's Cyber Smart Education Project empowers youth to explore, create and connect responsibly online. Visit actua.ca for additional information and resources on keeping youth safe online.

FIVE ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

1 CULTIVATE VALUES AND OFFLINE ENGAGEMENT

Help your child develop a strong sense of self and purpose beyond social media validation. Encourage activities that foster connection and fulfillment, both online and offline. Encourage regular breaks from social media to recharge when needed.

2 EMPOWER WITH GRADUAL INDEPENDENCE

Provide age-appropriate autonomy while maintaining oversight that matches your child's age and maturity level. Teach them how to manage privacy settings, avoid risky content, set boundaries, and recognize red flags online.

3 MODEL DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

Demonstrate critical thinking and responsible online behavior. Be willing to share your own experiences and ethical challenges, showing them that these issues affect everyone.

4 FOSTER EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

Engage in open conversations about their online experiences and responses. Help your child develop self-awareness and emotional regulation and remind them to ask questions about what they see online.

5 FACILITATE CRITICAL THINKING AND REFLECTION

Encourage them to consider others before posting or commenting and ask “How might this affect someone else?” Remind them that online words hurt like real ones. **Encourage them to share what they know with their friends**, helping create a more positive and safer online environment for everyone.