



PROMOTING DIGITAL WELLBEING

One of the challenges for parents is knowing how to monitor and manage their teenager's use of technology, such as the Internet, websites, social media, and smart phones and other communication devices. This is best done as a gradual process as the teenager grows from being a child into an adolescent. Every parent has to develop their own rules and set appropriate limits to encourage responsible, safe use of these evolving opportunities. This tip sheet provides some ideas on how to help teenagers achieve this goal.

WHAT IS DIGITAL WELLBEING?

Many teenagers have access to a range of communication tools and devices. These provide many positive opportunities, but also come with risks. While the opportunities are often immediate, some of the risks are not so obvious, and some may not become clear until later.

This can be a challenge for parents who may struggle to provide guidance as their teenagers seem to embrace change with ease. Meanwhile, parents may have difficulty just trying to keep up.

Managing the Internet safely involves:

- knowing enough to take advantage of the benefits, while at the same time reducing the risks
- being aware of the decisions teenagers need to make to use technology wisely
- using the technology to enhance family relationships
- teaching teenagers to become informed consumers
- preventing technology from dominating our lives
- keeping up with developments

Potential concerns with Internet usage include cyber bullying, identity theft, scams, gaming addiction, gambling, and sexual predation or exposure to illegal or undesirable material.

While some limits are necessary, parents who over-react and attempt to ban or impose unreasonable limits on the use of Internet-enabled devices can find this creates resentment, restricts opportunities for positive activities and is often difficult to enforce in the longer term.

HOW TO PROMOTE DIGITAL WELLBEING

The online world can provide teenagers with many of their needs, but it is no substitute for physical activity and face-to-face social contact.

Habits formed during childhood and adolescence often persist into adult life. They have a major impact on personal relationships and on a person's health. Parents should therefore encourage good personal habits in their teenagers from the beginning.

This might relate to your teenager having a regular diet, being active and getting plenty of exercise. It might also mean having a good sleep routine and good personal hygiene.



▼ Inform yourself about current trends

Ask friends, teachers and parents what limits they put on their teenagers' use of the Internet, computers and smart phones.

You don't have to follow what others do, but it may give you some valuable ideas about what decisions to make yourself.

Make sure you know what electronic devices your teenager has access to, what they can do with those devices and what Internet connectivity the device has. It is also important to find out what apps, social media, websites, gaming and other online platforms they are using. Together with your teenager, see if you can find out what the costs are of using these services and what protection or safeguards are available. You may need to discuss what you and your teenager think of as risks as they may have very different ideas to yours. New apps are being developed all the time that can be useful to parents. Some of these can block access to certain apps or websites, or track the amount of time spent on other apps to assist with time management.



▼ Encourage your teenager to become an intelligent consumer

The amount of information available on the Internet is huge, and it is often difficult to sift fact from opinion, and know what is true and what is false.

The most successful apps, websites and games are designed to be addictive. One challenge for parents is to promote their teenager's self-regulation skills so they can recognize this and set limits themselves without constant parental supervision. A parent might prompt their teenager by asking *How much time do you think is appropriate to spend on this app (or game or website)?* or *What do you think the people who developed this want from you — are you OK with that?* When talking together about online information, prompt your teenager to ask questions such as:

- Who owns the site, device or information?
- How can we find out how reliable it is?
- Is it just someone's opinion or is it based on facts?
- Is it trying to influence me or sell me something?

These are valuable discussions to have with your teenager. It is best to introduce them as questions to be curious about, rather than as challenges. For example, it would be better to say *I wonder how they funded this?* rather than saying *They are probably just trying to get you to buy something.*

Most teenagers respond better to this more neutral approach. They will often become defensive if they are challenged directly, and this can result in resentment and arguments.

▼ Encourage your teenager to be a responsible digital user

Teenagers need to learn about the possible consequences of their actions.

In the rapid-fire world of electronic communication, messages are sometimes sent without enough careful thought.



You may need to talk to your teenager and help them set goals to:

- Treat others as they would want to be treated.
- Treat information sent from others as confidential unless otherwise stated.
- Check a message before sending it.
- Sometimes delay sending a message to allow time for reflection.
- Resolve conflicts or disagreements face to face wherever possible. The absence of facial expression and voice tone online can create misunderstandings, which can quickly escalate.

When children or teenagers first start using devices, parents should monitor their activities closely and provide education and feedback about what is and is not appropriate. As they demonstrate responsible use they can be given more independence.

▼ Discuss common traps

It is easy to post something in cyberspace but sometimes very difficult to remove it. Ask your teenager to think about the possible consequences of having certain photos or comments available years into the future. For instance, future employers will often search for personal information on social media when considering job applicants. You might ask *Who might see what you post?* or *What might a future employer think if they saw that?*

Although some sites promise that material will be confidential, breaches are increasingly common and personal information that was thought to be private may become available to everyone. Material can be distributed very widely, very quickly and it may be impossible to call it back. Relationships and friendships can sometimes come to an unhappy end and what was kept private may then be made public. What might seem like fun now may be very embarrassing in the future (e.g. joining in a lewd act or posting an offensive message).

Downloading illegal material or clicking on an unknown link can result in being attacked by a virus or malware that can create problems that can be difficult or expensive to address.



Discuss with your teenager what they can do to avoid falling into these traps. Encourage them to tell you if they are concerned or doubtful about something, then coach them to problem solve to help decide the best course of action.

▼ Discuss rules about usage

Agreeing on a few rules makes life more predictable and helps everyone get on together. When everyone understands and agrees that a rule is reasonable, it is more likely to be followed. If an agreed rule is broken, it is also less likely there will be serious conflict.

Rules allow parents to pass on values that they consider important, such as honesty, reliability, politeness and respect for privacy. Learning to follow family rules helps teenagers follow community rules, laws and codes of behavior.

Agree on rules about:

- Times when devices are and are not allowed to be used.
- Who will pay the charges for different services.
- The use of filters or other software to restrict access to some services.
- Whether devices will be switched off or locked away overnight or at other times.

It is ideal if all family members, especially parents, follow the rules. Setting a good example is a good way to promote the behavior parents want from their teenagers.

▼ **Involve your teenager in setting the rules**

Your teenager is more likely to follow a rule if they are involved in discussing it. Choose a time to do this when everyone is calm and has time to talk. Do not discuss rules when people are angry or upset.

Include some rules about keeping some personal information out of public view, such as:

- usernames and passwords
- home address or phone number
- some personal photographs
- bank or credit card details

Discuss and agree on consequences if the rules are not followed. This might include removing access for a time, changing passwords or login privileges, removing access to bank accounts.

▼ **Help your teenager develop a plan to stay safe**

Things your teenager needs to know:

- Not to respond to unwanted or offensive messages.
- How to block or report anyone sending offensive content.
- How to offer support and assistance to anyone they know is being bullied.
- How to avoid getting into situations which might result in embarrassing photographs being taken and posted online.

Encourage your teenager to report any suspicious or unwanted online contact.

▼ **Explain that some things are illegal**

- Downloading or copying pirated material may result in a heavy fine.
- Taking, receiving or forwarding sexual images of anyone underage may be seen as distributing child pornography and prosecuted as a crime.

Failure to pay charges incurred by using electronic devices may also result in disconnection and equipment repossession.

▼ **Monitor their activity**

Talk to your teenager about what they do online. Make this a regular part of your conversation to show interest and include comments about your own experiences. If possible, locate any desktop computers in shared or visible spaces in the home and discourage device use in private areas. This can be difficult where teenagers have purchased devices themselves and believe they can use them as they wish. However, parents need to be clear that how, where and when they use them is a family matter, and should be discussed accordingly.

▼ **Spend time together online**

Prompt your teenager to show you how to improve your knowledge and use of computers and other devices. Use online services to communicate with your teenager on a regular basis.

▼ **Talk to your teenager about *What if...* situations**

Use examples from the news, TV shows or movies, such as where someone received a message that was not meant for them, or where they misunderstood the message.

Ask your teenager *What if that happened to you?* Then discuss what they could do to prevent it or how they would deal with it if it happened.

HOW TO HELP YOUR TEENAGER DEAL WITH PROBLEMS

▼ **Discuss cyber bullying**

Cyber bullying is quite common and can be very damaging for teenagers who experience it. One of the best ways to deal with cyber bullying is to make it public, so encourage your teenager to tell you or another responsible adult if they know that cyber bullying is happening. Explain to your teenager that harassing, threatening or humiliating another person can be very damaging and may even be illegal. Save evidence of cyber bullying (e.g. take screenshots of messages, save what is possible) in case you need to contact the school, police, mobile phone carrier or Internet service provider.

DEVICE USE AND TIME MANAGEMENT

▼ **Provide as little help as your teenager needs**

If your teenager has difficulty managing their device use, arrange a time to discuss the key issues, such as what time they should go to bed and get up, when they are permitted to use electronic devices, and what physical activities to undertake. You may also need to discuss how they will remember to do these things.



This might include helping your teenager set alarms, create lists or set up reminders to help them change their habits.

▼ **Encourage your teenager to make a commitment**

Another way to help your teenager remember is to get them to make a commitment. This should be clear and specific, such as *I'll turn off the computer at 10.30 pm*, rather than *I won't stay up late*.

▼ **Check whether your teenager keeps to the commitment**

You then need to monitor whether your teenager meets their commitment or not. If they do, let your teenager know that you appreciate that they have done what they said they would do. Perhaps ask them whether keeping to the plan was difficult



and what they might do to make it easier. Ask if they see any benefits from following the plan or what changes might be useful. Praise any positive suggestions your teenager makes to encourage their involvement.

▼ **Problem solve any obstacles to meeting their commitment**

If your teenager has difficulty meeting their commitment, avoid lecturing them. Instead, ask them to remind you what the commitment was, and then ask what prevented them from meeting it this time. Discuss what they might have done differently and how they might meet their commitment next time.

▼ **Monitor compliance with agreed rules**

If you find that a rule is still not being followed:

- Do not lecture or criticize your teenager.
- First, ask them to remind you what the rule is and what they should be doing instead.
- Then ask them to follow the rule.

If they now follow the rule, tell your teenager how much you appreciate their effort.

If this does not work and your teenager continues to break the rule, consider setting up a behavior contract. This usually means agreeing on privileges or rewards that your teenager will earn if they follow the rules, but will be withdrawn if they continue to break them.

Hold a meeting with your teenager to discuss the contract. Part of the contract might involve using a time-limiting app, setting an alarm or other ways of setting time limits on device use. Write it down and use a monitoring chart to check how well it is working. Review it after a few days and make changes if needed. More details about setting up behavior contracts can be found in the *Positive Parenting for Parents with Teenagers* booklet.

BECOME FAMILIAR WITH RELIABLE WEBSITES

Many government and non-government organizations have websites which provide up-to-date, reliable advice about technological developments that can be very helpful. Enter Internet safety, cyber smart or similar terms into a search engine to locate these sites and visit them regularly.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Do not get too upset if your teenager makes mistakes as they learn to navigate the Internet. These are challenges for everyone and things will not always run smoothly. Learn together where possible, and keep yourself informed as much as you can.

KEY STEPS

- Inform yourself about current trends.
- Encourage your teenager to become an intelligent consumer.
- Encourage your teenager to be a responsible digital user.
- Discuss common traps.
- Discuss rules about usage.
- Involve your teenager in setting the rules.
- Help your teenager develop a plan to stay safe.
- Explain that some things are illegal.
- Monitor their activity.
- Spend time together online.
- Talk to your teenager about *What if...* situations.
- Discuss cyber bullying.
- Provide as little help as your teenager needs.
- Encourage your teenager to make a commitment.
- Check whether your teenager keeps to the commitment.
- Problem solve any obstacles to meeting their commitment.
- Monitor compliance with agreed rules.

FURTHER HELP

If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet or contact:

Note down any useful web addresses here:

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