

How to talk to your children about sex, sexting, and digital safety

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD about sex, sexting, and digital safety can be uncomfortable and can lead to feelings of resentment for you and your child. If you've already established open communication with your teen regarding the topics of sex and online safety, this guide may reinforce what you are already doing. If you haven't started talking openly with your teen about this, we hope this guide will help you get started.

Each family has its own unique sensibilities regarding views on sex and how openly it is discussed at home. The reality is, if you aren't talking to your child about your family's values toward relationships and sex and how they play into online safety, your teen may be getting "schooled" only by pop culture and interactions with peers. With social media at their reach 24/7, children may be exposed to – and find normal – all types of sexual content.

Facilitating discussions about your child's online presence and interactions is just the beginning to counteracting the negative messaging they may receive online.

For some parents, it might be hard to know where to start and what to ask or say. Check in with yourself prior to starting a conversation to set realistic expectations of what you may hear from your teen.

You might find it helpful to begin with frequent, casual conversations, inquiring about their online experiences and their thoughts about sex and technology. Keep in mind that it may take time for your child to begin to feel they can open up to you about sex and their life online.

Examples of limitations/boundaries/expectations to consider implementing:

- Designate a "no technology" time (e.g. 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. or whatever hours work best for your family). If your child has a difficult time following this, your



family can designate a space to "keep" phones during these hours.

- It is OK to monitor your teen's technology use and to make them aware of this. Familiarize yourself with the apps, programs, and platforms they use. Review and adjust privacy settings for games, apps, and social media sites and pay particular attention to apps and sites that feature end-to-end encryption, direct messaging, video chats, file uploads, and user anonymity, which are frequently relied upon by child predators.
- Set the expectation that these conversations will happen frequently and that participating in discussions about technology is part of the responsibility of their having a phone.
- Youth will be asked to share personal information. Discuss with your child what is OK to share and what is private, or off-limits.

Tips to keep in mind when talking to your child:

- Curiosity rather than accusations is key when talking with your child. Your child may be exploring their sexuality, and your response to what they say during these conversations can determine how open your child will be with you. Listen openly to them and allow them to come to you when a boundary is crossed.

- Listening and giving them space to share is a good way to model respectful behavior. Even if some things may be difficult to hear coming from your child, consider what is developmentally appropriate.
- Reinforce that respecting people's privacy, including their own, helps to build meaningful, healthy relationships.
- Be frank about the consequences of sexualized content: it lasts forever, it can affect their college applications, job applications, and their self-esteem.
- Talk to your children about sexting laws pertaining to minors. Creating, distributing, or being in possession of sexual images or videos of youth under the age 18 is illegal and considered child pornography – even if they are their own images or videos.
- Work together to brainstorm responses to peer pressure before things arise. Start with small things.

Questions to begin conversations:

Cyberbullying

- What have your interactions been like with others online? Have you ever been harassed or made to feel bad by a negative comment directed toward you? How did it make you feel? What did you do?
- Have you witnessed any name calling or body shaming online? What, if anything, do you think should be done when that happens?
 - When would you expect an adult to get involved?

Sexting

- What are your thoughts on people, especially people your age, sexting? Have you engaged in any sexting?
 - If your teen answers yes, follow up with questions like these:
 - What did you and/or the other person do or share that made it sexting?
 - Did you participate willingly, or did you feel pressured? Did you pressure the other



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person to participate? (*This is a good time to discuss consent and respecting boundaries with your teen.*)

- Do you know the person in real life?
- Is this something that you do with one person (i.e. your girlfriend or boyfriend), or have you done this with different people?
- If your teen answers no, follow up with questions like these:
 - If someone you know asks for a sexually suggestive or explicit photo/video of you, what would you do?
 - What if it's someone you like?
- Have you ever been messaged or contacted by someone you don't know?
 - Did you respond to them?
 - Did you feel comfortable messaging with them?
 - What kinds of questions do you think you should ask to get to know someone online?
 - How do you know the person you are messaging with is not an adult posing as a teen? What would you do if you find out they are an adult?
 - What if they ask to meet in real life?
- When is it time to ask me or another adult for help?

Pornography

For parents to think about: *What are your expectations of your teen regarding pornography? What would be the consequences, (If any), if you find pornography?*

- Have you ever seen something online that made you uncomfortable or curious? Was it something of a sexual nature? How did you come across it? Was it accidental, or did you look it up? How did it make you feel?
 - If your teen admits to looking it up on their own: What made/makes you want to look up porn, or watch it? What does watching porn make you think about sex?