

# Six tips for keeping children safe online

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If you're a parent of teenagers, you might feel like your kids have the upper hand when it comes to technology. As digital natives, teens intrinsically (or so it seems) understand what platforms, programs, apps, and social media channels to use when—and, unlike many of the adults in their lives, they know how to use them.

As a result, it can be daunting for parents and guardians to figure out

how to guide their children in safely using [digital tools](#). What is the appropriate amount of autonomy for teens in the online world? How much should kids be limited in their use of social [media](#) and their access to other kinds of [digital media](#)? How can parents and guardians strike a balance between the autonomy teens need and safety?

Julie Dobrow, senior lecturer at the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development, Film and Media Studies faculty member, and senior fellow in media and [civic engagement](#) at the Tisch College of Civic Life, has some answers to those questions. An expert in the effects of media on children, Dobrow advises parents to accept children's use of digital media—and maybe even embrace it.

Digital platforms can offer today's teenagers important communal experiences, she said, and teaching them how to make wise choices might be more effective than attempting to restrict their usage: "Social media scholar danah boyd has talked about how important the socially networked life is for teens. It's like the mall was for many of us growing up—a place to hang out."

It's also developmentally appropriate. "Adolescents are doing what they need to be doing," according to Dobrow. "They're just doing it online. For example, they like to try on different identities: 'What would it be like if I were like this? What would it be like if I were like that?' Social media enables them to do that to a greater extent than previous generations were able to do. And there are some advantages in that, in curating your best self and presenting it to the world. But it can also be problematic."

It's the problematic part that scares many parents. There are horror stories about predators lurking online, gleaning information about kids' locations, exposing them to inappropriate content, or blackmailing them for money. And while teens tend to be savvy about what technologies are

out there and how to use them, their inexperience in the world might leave them vulnerable to exactly the horrors that parents fear.

What's more, as Dobrow points out, it's not just external horrors that give reason to worry; it's internal ones as well. "Many teens feel pressure to curate their profiles, present an ideal body, an ideal social life, in ways that are unrealistic and difficult to achieve," she noted. "And because teens' lives change so often, posting something one day might mean something very different the next."

But, Dobrow says, there are steps parents and guardians can take to help their children protect themselves from both external and internal threats. She sat down with Tufts Now to discuss some of her top tips—and, as she put it, "what it means to be a media literate human being."

## **Model good behavior**

First and foremost, it's important for parents to show, through their own practices, how to use media properly. "If parents are talking on their phones while playing with [young children](#), or texting at meals, children will see this behavior as normative," Dobrow said. "Think about how you want your kids to use their phones and social media and follow those guidelines yourself."

## **Be knowledgeable about social media**

New apps and platforms emerge constantly, and it's up to parents to keep up. Google searches for "apps teens use" or "social media for teenagers" can yield helpful information. But it's not enough to know just the names of popular platforms. "Find out what parental controls exist," advised Dobrow. "Sometimes there aren't any; sometimes there are some and they're not great—but know what they are so you can make decisions

about the right settings for your family."

One great resource for finding out details about emerging and existing platforms and apps is [Common Sense Media](#), Dobrow says, "The site offers a lot of really good, practical advice and information for parents."

## **Follow age guidelines**

Equally critical, according to Dobrow, is knowing what age brackets specific programs are aimed at and then attempting to ensure your children aren't accessing the programs before they're ready. "It's especially important to try to get middle-schoolers to follow the rules," Dobrow said. "Many social media sites list 13 as the minimum age, for reasons of safety and privacy. Encouraging kids to abide by the rules can help them—and you—filter out inappropriate information or exposure."

## **Keep the lines of communication open**

How do you get kids to follow the rules? The best way is to ensure that you're communicating with them clearly, said Dobrow. "Try to talk with them about social media and try not to be judgmental." If you don't ask your kids what platforms they're using or how they use the apps you've seen on their phones, you won't know, and you won't be able to perform your due diligence to make decisions about their usage.

Moreover, as Dobrow puts it, "it's just a reality of life in the 21st century that kids today are growing up in an intensively media-saturated world. And that's not going to go away. I don't think restricting kids' phones ultimately works, but this is a decision every family should make. So rather than try to disparage social media or compare it to what we had when we were growing up, I think the best thing that we can do as parents is encourage our kids to be media literate—by which I mean that

kids should become both informed consumers and informed producers of media."

And, she added, they should start developing their media literacy skills as soon as they start consuming media—which likely will be before they even start school. That means it's on parents to begin teaching them.

Even after formal education begins, very few schools teach media literacy. "The U.S. is far behind where a lot of other nations are," Dobrow pointed out. "Canada, Great Britain, Japan, and others all have mandated media literacy curricula. At the moment, only 14 states have similar mandates, and some, like Massachusetts, have gotten to media literacy only by embedding it in other disciplines." That means, again, parents often need to play a central role in communicating with their children about what it means to stay safe online.

## **Help kids see possible consequences**

Children, even older teenagers who behave like young adults, lack the perspective that time can bring to parents. Often, that means it's difficult for them to imagine the longer-term potential outcomes of their actions—and how far-reaching those outcomes can be.

"Remind them that everything they post online can be seen by a potentially enormous audience, and that nothing they post goes away," said Dobrow. "Teenagers tend to understand the basic etiquette of posting online—don't say on [social media](#) anything you wouldn't say to someone's face. But they need to be reminded that even if something seems to have been deleted, it's not necessarily actually deleted, and that anything can be made public—and presented in distorted ways. We're increasingly seeing there are ways to cut, paste, and visually alter messages."

For tweens and younger teens, the first basic principle to teach is don't post your location. Without scaring kids, help them see the possible consequences of letting strangers know where they are, Dobrow advised. She adds that parents also should avoid public posts that indicate their child's location; for example, don't say that you're picking your kid up from school at 3pm.

## **Let your kids teach you**

One of the most effective ways to instill media literacy in teenagers? Open yourself up to learning from them, Dobrow said. "Teens like to feel that they have a certain body of knowledge that they're expert about. It can be kind of empowering for them to know more than their parents do."

"As my own kids were growing up," noted Dobrow, "I would say to them, 'I don't understand what this is. Can you explain it to me?'" An honest approach often opens the lines of communication, Dobrow said, and parents who adopt such an approach can both learn what they need to know and explicitly discuss with their kids the privacy settings they should be using and the dangers they should watch out for.

At the same time, Dobrow pointed out that, because media technologies and practices change so quickly, parents should—and can—evolve a partnership with their children around media use. "They can learn from us," she suggested, "but we can also learn from them."

Provided by Tufts University

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