

Children and the internet: Helping kids navigate this modern minefield

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The United States' most senior public health official, surgeon-general Vivek Murthy, believes [social media platforms should come with warning labels](#). The United Nations' education, science and culture

agency [says smartphones should be banned in schools](#). Chinese regulators are pushing to [limit children's smartphone use to just two hours a day](#).

These are just a few high profile examples of growing global concerns about the risks young people face when using the internet. Those worries are backed by a large, [global](#) body of [research](#). Social media use has been linked to feelings of [envy](#), [depression](#) and [anxiety](#) among young people all over the world, [including](#) those in [African countries](#).

This evidence can make for depressing reading, especially if you're the parent or caregiver of a teenager. Many may be tempted to confiscate their teens' cellphones, lock away their tablets and keep them as far away from the internet as possible. But that's neither practical nor helpful in a hyper-connected, digital world.

Though we come from different academic disciplines as a [children's rights researcher](#), a [moral philosopher](#) and a [clinical researcher](#), our current work focuses on the same thing: the ethics of new and emerging technologies and [their impact](#).

We know that protecting children is a shared responsibility. Government, service providers and education systems all have a role to play. But parents are key. So, drawing from our ongoing research, we have three messages for parents trying to navigate this modern minefield.

One, the internet and social media are not all bad for children. Some online spaces may even help young people to [manage their mental health](#).

Two, children and teens [have rights](#) to access information, share their views and have those views respected.

Three, by creating a strong foundation of open, loving and trusting communication, you help your children navigate the risks, identify the ethical pitfalls and enjoy the benefits of social media platforms.

Benefits of online spaces

While it is true that [internet use](#) comes with risks, there's also [evidence](#) that it can benefit [young people](#).

For instance, interactive features and user-generated content platforms such as social media, blogs and forums enable social interaction and connection. These online spaces allow children to engage with peers, share interests and build communities. They also provide outlets for creativity and self-expression, helping kids to develop [digital literacy skills](#) and shape their identities.

Some internet spaces may help children and teens to manage their mental health. The COVID pandemic accelerated the development of digital mental health services like free platforms that connect children to counselors, chat bots, text tools and apps that offer support for children and parents. Childline South Africa's [free online chat service](#) is one example.

Children's rights

Too many societies and communities forget that children, like adults, have rights.

In South Africa, for instance, children's rights are [enshrined in section 28 of the constitution](#).

Globally, the [Convention on the Rights of Children](#) (which was adopted

by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989) guarantees children's rights to access information, to freedom of association, to share their thoughts freely and to have their views respected, to health, including [mental health](#), and to privacy, non-discrimination, protection, education and play.

More recently, the United Nations issued [guidance](#) on children's rights in the digital environment.

Several countries (among them [Australia](#), [Brazil](#), [Canada](#), [China](#) and [the UK](#)) now have online safety legislation aimed at protecting kids and teens.

Some parents may wonder why all countries don't simply make laws to reduce the risks posed by [social media platforms](#). The reality is that it is difficult to implement and enforce these regulations.

African countries have been slow to regulate online safety for minors. South Africa is working on a [White Paper](#) that aims to protect children from harmful content and ensure that content meets their needs. However, it is still a draft; new legislation and regulation are years away.

But there is no need for parents to wait before starting to teach their children how to safely use the internet.

Trust and communication

Some parents may fear that they don't have the skills and knowledge to properly support their teens. Just remember that parents find their way around new things all the time: setting boundaries for young children, teaching them to read and write, and, later on, managing adolescent mood swings, discussing sexuality or counseling teens through their first heartbreaks.

When it comes to safe internet navigation and use, parents and caregivers can help children in two main ways.

The first is by prioritizing open, trusting and loving communication from when your children are young. Since children are constantly developing, the kinds of things you discuss will shift over time. You can start talking about the internet and social media when you think your children are ready. This will differ from child to child.

The second is to develop their critical thinking skills so they can analyze and evaluate information and arguments in a clear, rational and objective manner. Parents and caregivers can encourage children to ask questions, challenge assumptions and explore different ways of seeing things. There are also programs like [Web Rangers](#) that help children to develop these skills so they can become responsible digital citizens.

Children who can think critically will gain the confidence to rely on their own reasoning rather than just unthinkingly adopting others' attitudes. These skills will help them to make responsible choices.

Spending time building a trusting relationship with your children is also crucial. [Parenting for a digital future](#) goes beyond the fear-driven response of regulating screen time and parental policing. Critical capacity is developed through negotiation and engagement. And of course these skills are universally applicable, protecting [children](#) in other aspects of their lives, too.

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