

Online involvement: Know your teens' online activities

It's not a surprise that adolescents are drawn to the Internet and new technology. The appeal seems quite logical as teens can quickly connect to individuals to communicate; they can search topics they are otherwise embarrassed to discuss with others; and, they can experiment with intimacy. While these are all healthy adolescent behaviours, using technology for these purposes does present some risks because an adolescents' behavior is less inhibited when they use technology. They say and do things that they would not otherwise do if they were face to face with the person.

A study of chatroom users found disproportionate numbers of sexual abuse victims, adolescents who had run away from home, adolescents who were intrigued by risk, and adolescents who use drugs and alcohol. Research shows that the vulnerability of these adolescents may leave them ill-equipped to recognize and fend off attempts at exploitation.

It is quite common for parents to struggle with how to stay involved in their teen's online activity. Many parents wrestle with the question of how to balance their teen's need for privacy with their parental job to provide protection. The following information serves as a guide for parents in managing this complex issue.

▶ **Exciting time**

Adolescence is a very important time in development; a time of enormous learning opportunity. Experiences during this period will shape who the teen becomes as an adult.

▶ **It's your business!**

Staying involved in your teens' online activity becomes increasingly difficult as youth at this age tend to seek greater independence from their parents. The most common area you find teens expanding their social world is through the Internet and cell phones. Although not a simple process, parents must try to stay involved and supervise their adolescent while still balancing their need for independence. Typically, teens are highly skeptical of parental involvement and questions and will swiftly leap to the classic phrase, "It's none of your business." However, rest assured, "It is your business!"

▶ **You're on the right track**

- It's okay to feel frustrated. Dealing with your adolescent can be exhausting.
- It's a healthy sign that your adolescent is seeking privacy and more independence.
- You're on the right track in wanting to stay involved.

It can be tempting to convince yourself that your teen is old enough to handle whatever comes their way. Adolescents can appear very mature and ready to take on the world. However, research on brain development shows this is simply not the case. Teen brains are still developing and they do not have the capacity to properly deal with all situations.



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It can also be tempting to be over-involved and want to know everything they are thinking and the ins and outs about what your child and their friends are doing. Demanding to know all their private thoughts and ins and outs of their activities with friends is intrusive and can be harmful to your relationship. It's a matter of balancing when to step back and give them space and when to ignore their demands for privacy.

▶ **Walking the tightrope**

For example, privacy is not an issue when:

- you are monitoring their activities (including Internet use, cell phone use);
- you notice changes in their typical behaviour and are concerned about their well-being; and
- you have concern about their safety.

▶ **There is good news**

There are many ways to stay involved and increase your adolescent's safety online without having to meet them head on. You probably have many protective factors already in place that increase their safety and help with identity formation. These include:

1. Using anti-virus and filtering software: Be sure to keep all software up to date
2. Reviewing sites your child visits to see how they are sharing information and pictures of themselves and others.
3. Reinforcing the public nature of the Internet: Once pictures or information are sent over the Internet, control over what happens to them is lost. Remind your adolescent to be mindful of what's sent.
4. Monitoring webcam use: Inform your adolescent that pictures can be captured (freezing photos, recording video) by others without their knowledge. Remind your teen to be mindful of how the webcam is used and disconnect when not in use.



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Protecting your adolescent online: Checklist

I. **DIRECT** ways to increase safety:

- Use anti-virus software and firewalls (link to relevant software info):** Be sure to Keep all software up to date.
- Reinforce the public nature of the Internet:** Inform your adolescent that once pictures or information is sent, s/he loses control of what happens to it, so to be mindful of what is sent.
- Monitor webcam use:** Inform your adolescent that pictures can be captured (freezing photos, recording video) by others without knowing, so to be mindful of how the webcam is used. Disconnect the webcam when not in use.

II. **INDIRECT** ways to increase safety: Building a positive identity

The following are important components of risk management and can assist in building a positive relationship with your adolescent and contribute to his/her positive identity formation.

- Your adolescent needs you to be emotionally available:** Pay attention to how your adolescent is feeling. Adolescents communicate through their behaviour. Acknowledge their feelings. Encourage him/her to talk to you whenever needed.
- Your adolescent needs to feel a sense of personal achievement:** Help your adolescent find something to get involved in that gives him/her a sense of accomplishment and significance. Examples: academics, music, sports, art, technology and innovation, leadership (youth groups, school groups, etc.). Even if your adolescent is reluctant and appears resistant to the idea, help him/her find ways to feel successful.
- Your adolescent needs to feel like a good person:** Help your adolescent build his/her morality so they feel like a good person. Being responsible, patient, kind, honest, generous, and humble (modest) all contribute to having positive self-esteem. It is important to model these behaviours as adolescents are highly sensitive to hypocrisy. They know if you 'walk the walk' or just 'talk the talk.' Acknowledge times when s/he demonstrates virtues.
- Your adolescent needs to feel a sense of belonging:** Help your adolescent find a way to feel like s/he belongs. Examples may include: with peers at school, in extracurricular activities, youth groups, clubs, etc. This is especially important for adolescents who historically have difficulty making friends. Their sense of belonging may not come from their peer group at school. It may need to be achieved elsewhere (outside of school at youth groups, extracurricular activities, etc.). This can be a challenge for some adolescents, but keep trying!



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- **Your adolescent needs to feel love from the family:** Create opportunities to spend special time with your adolescent engaged in an activity (sports, movie, shopping, lunch, dinner, etc.) of his/her choice. One hour each week, every second week, or even once a month will help build your relationship. Even if you are met with resistance, persevere as your adolescent will benefit just from knowing you care.

**(Link): A more in-depth look at risk and protective factors*

What behaviours should you look for so you know when to intervene

As a parent you know your adolescent better than anyone else. If you have a gut feeling that something is not right, and you've noticed changes in your teen's behaviour, trust your instincts! It certainly doesn't mean you should jump to the worst conclusions as there are many reasons why your adolescent could be acting differently.

Listed below are some indicators to help you know when you should intervene. Please note that the list is not exhaustive. It is important to pay attention to any behaviours that become excessive and interfere with your adolescent's life.

- **Adolescent is acting very differently:** Does s/he seem more withdrawn, emotional, defensive, aggressive, angry, or secretive? Is your adolescent also secretive online or on the phone?
- **Adolescent has significantly increased time spent online or using technology:** Have you noticed a significant increase in how often and how long your adolescent is online? Some adolescents want to spend hours at a time online because they are meeting needs. You can be sure that adolescents are not online to search of safety tips. They are socializing and having fun! Remember, the hallmark of adolescence is their sense of invincibility. They have a pseudo sense that they can handle anything! They need adult supervision and assistance with precarious situations as they are still developing and do not have the capacity to handle all situations with which they may be faced.
- **Adolescent does not respond to limits:** Does your adolescent seem consumed with going online? Does s/he seem preoccupied? Has s/he responded to limits placed on how often and how long s/he is allowed to be online?
- **Adolescent feels the Internet is a private forum for communicating with friends:** The Internet carries a misleading illusion of privacy. Adolescents gravitate towards this misconception as their need for privacy holds centre stage. They are seeking and often feel entitled to more privacy. Many do not fully appreciate the public nature of the Internet. Often they do not truly conceptualize the world wide connection nor the potential manipulation and harm that can come from sharing information via technology. For example: They may choose to engage in conversation with an individual who makes them feel good about themselves, not truly understanding the subtle manipulation and could find themselves in a difficult situation where someone trying to use them for their sexual gratification.



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- ❑ **Online activities are interfering with adolescent's life:** Has your adolescent lost interest in his/her regular activities? Does his/her desire to go online interfere with other responsibilities and interests?
- ❑ **Adolescent receiving gifts:** Has your adolescent received gifts such as money, webcam, digital camera, cell phone, etc.? Has your adolescent received late night phone calls from unknown callers? Have you noticed unknown numbers, including long distance calls on cellular phones bills?

What now?

Don't overreact. Identify what changes you are noticing. Your adolescent may be pushing boundaries online and needs some adult direction to reestablish the line. S/he may need help restoring perspective and placing some balance between time online and offline. It is typical for adolescents to break boundaries, especially if they think adults aren't aware. Sometimes all it takes is the perception of an adult presence to re-adjust their behaviour.

1. **No concerning behaviour is identified:** If your adolescent is not showing signs of concerning behaviours, visit our section on protective factors (link back to the protective factors) and read up on strategies you can incorporate into daily life to increase your adolescent's safety.
2. **High-risk behaviour is identified:** If you are noticing mildly concerning behavior, get involved as early intervention is key. Become more visible in your adolescent's online activity. Calmly communicate your concerns and set limits for computer usage which you monitor closely. Just knowing you are aware and monitoring may be enough to change behaviour. Keep monitoring his/her behaviour indirectly and continue finding time to build your relationship with your adolescent. This is one of the most important protection measures for youth. (link to Positive Identity information)
3. **Multiple high-risk behaviours are identified:** If multiple concerning high-risk behaviours are identified, it is important to be vigilant with your follow-up response. If you feel your adolescent is in immediate danger, you should call the police. If you are unsure and require additional information, you should call **Cybertip.ca** at **1-866-658-9022**.



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Steps to address risk behaviors

When you identify risk behaviours, there are many ways you can step in and help your adolescent. It is likely that your adolescent is engaging in high risk behaviour because s/he is meeting needs. Adolescents will always find ways to meet their needs. Identify whether the needs your adolescent is meeting are constructive or destructive. Consider the following steps:

- ❑ **Step 1: Increase your involvement.** Be emotionally available and connect with your adolescent. They will likely resist your involvement, but do not back down. It is his/her job to test limits and your job to set them.
- ❑ **Step 2: Increase direct supervision and directly monitor online activities and phone calls.** Check chat logs histories on social networking and instant messaging accounts. (link to safety and the internet section on how to check histories)
- ❑ **Step 3: Enforce limits on Internet use.** Depending on the level of risk, you may consider taking away Internet privileges for a limited time.
- ❑ **Step 4: Build your relationship with your adolescent.** This will be difficult as they are likely to resist. Do not be discouraged—just continue creating opportunities. Even if your adolescent is resistant, s/he will feel how much you care, which is a powerful protective factor.

