

As Your Child Grows – Considering the Years Ahead

A Few Words About Online Safety

The Internet provides kids with interactive experiences that can be fun and educational, but also exposes them to unsafe situations. Tech advances have increased access and portability of web platforms which increases the time kids spend online. As they get older, they are much more independent in their online activities, which increases their exposure to danger. For example, if your child has been interacting with someone they met online, they may no longer consider that person a stranger. Reinforce the notion that even if someone appears friendly or interesting, people they only know from the Internet should not be trusted, and your kids should never agree to meet them in real life. Consider the following:

- Set “house rules” about the sites your kids can visit, which have been vetted by you, and use parental controls as needed
- Help younger kids set their first (strong) passwords and come to an agreement with older kids about their right to privacy
- Encourage younger kids to come to you if anything they see online makes them uncomfortable
- Instruct them to never give out personal identifying information without parental consent
- Tell them to never respond to emails or texts from people they don’t know—best not even to open them!
- Talk to your kids about cyberbullying—online harassment can have deadly results

For teens, make sure they’re aware of online privacy and the controls they can set to keep their social media accounts secure from anyone who’s not a “friend”. Otherwise, much of what they post online can be viewed by anyone—which can create vulnerabilities to scams, cyberbullies, and other online predators. It’s also best to avoid “status updates” that give away location information, if a page is publicly viewable.

Bullying / Cyberbullying

Each day, nearly 160,000 children miss school due to fears of bullying. Between 20 - 28% of students in grades 6 through 12 experience bullying, but only 1/3 of bullying incidents are reported to an adult. Further, about 1/3 of student victims of bullying have been victimized online.†*

*National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics

†National Education Association

Bullying covers a range of behaviors usually involving the use or threat of violence or shaming, whether in person or online, which are designed to hurt someone or to assert power or control over them. Be on the lookout for changes in behavior. Some warning signs that your child may be getting bullied include:

- Withdrawal or depression
- Loss of interest in friends or activities
- Drop in grades/loss of interest in school
- Finds excuses to stay home e.g. faking illness
- Missing or damaged belongings
- Needing extra money or supplies
- Physical complaints—e.g. frequent headaches or stomachaches
- Running away
- Self-harming behavior or suicide attempts

If your child is the victim of bullying, be supportive and assure your child it isn’t his/her fault. You might want to discuss the situation with the school and your child’s teachers. Find ways to strengthen your child’s self-confidence to be assertive without responding with violence. This could mean the use of simple techniques involving positive body language: standing up straight, making eye contact when speaking, and speaking clearly. A good way to increase your child’s assertiveness and self-confidence is to encourage their involvement in sports or after-school activities where they can interact and make friends with other kids.

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Warning signs that your child may be bullying others include:

- General disrespect of authority or of people who are different
- Enjoys violence or talking and joking about violent acts
- Is impulsive or aggressive; likes to be in charge
- Lacks empathy
- Has unexplained extra money or belongings
- Very competitive and concerned for popularity

Understanding the Risks: Drug and Alcohol Abuse Prevention

The older a person is when they first use drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, the less likely that person is to become addicted. When parents talk to their children about drugs and alcohol, the children are 50% less likely to become users than kids who don't talk to their parents on the subject.

— National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD)

Given these figures, it makes sense not to put off talking to your children about drugs and alcohol. It's never too early to start helping your children build the skills needed to handle the stress, peer pressure and disappointments that are part of growing up—the same skills that will help them keep away from the pitfalls of drug and alcohol use.

Some Tips for Getting Started:

- Listen as well as talk, encouraging a conversation—especially with older kids. The best thing a parent can do to keep their child safe is to understand the risks they're facing
- Be honest about legal and medical implications, as well as about family history. Susceptibility to addiction is a chronic problem linked to family history and genetics
- Set expectations, limits, and—importantly—consequences

Some Tips for Prevention:

- Promote healthy activities like sports and the arts
- Encourage community activities or a part-time job
- Educate yourself as a parent about the realities and risks of alcohol and drugs
- Be a positive role model—what you do is more important than what you say
- Keep track of your child's activities; make sure they check-in (kids who are not monitored are four times more likely to use)
- Keep track of alcohol and prescription drugs in the home—the most common source of access for children is through their parents

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