

Online Safety for Children

A guide for parents

Why Online Safety is More Than Just Rules

Think of online safety like teaching your child to ride a bike. You don't just tell them not to fall; you teach them balance, how to steer, and what to watch out for. Online safety is the same. It's about helping kids develop good habits and critical thinking skills, not just setting restrictions.

It's about empowering them to make smart choices, even when you're not around.

Like life, online safety is a journey of learning and growth. Focus on guiding your child through this digital landscape.

✗ Common Misconception:

- Setting strict rules is enough.
- Monitoring everything they do.
- Assuming kids will always follow the rules.

✓ Better Approach:

- Teaching critical thinking skills.
- Encouraging open communication.
- Understanding that kids will make mistakes (and that's okay!).

Helping Kids Build Confidence Online

A confident child is a safer child. When kids feel good about themselves, they're less likely to seek validation from risky online behaviour. Help your child build confidence by:

- **Celebrating their achievements:** Big or small, acknowledge their efforts and successes.
- **Encouraging their passions:** Support their hobbies and interests, both online and offline.
- **Teaching them to be assertive:** Help them learn how to say 'no' to things that make them uncomfortable.

Focusing on your child's effort, not just the end result, helps them build confidence and learn how to keep going when things feel hard. Encouraging positive online activities like digital art or coding gives them safe spaces to be creative while developing useful skills. Helping your child notice what they're good at and what makes them unique can boost self-esteem and make them less vulnerable to outside pressures, both online and in everyday life.

Supporting Kids Who Struggle Online

Not every child navigates the online world with ease. Some may struggle with cyberbullying, social comparison, or addiction. Be a safe space for your child to come to when things get tough. Let them know that it's okay to ask for help, and reassure them that you will listen without judgment. Create an environment of trust so your child will feel safe coming to you. Be there to support them through difficult times.

Some warning signs to watch for include changes in your child's mood or behaviour, pulling away from activities they usually enjoy, becoming more secretive about their online activity, or showing increased anger, anxiety, or sadness. If you notice these changes, try to start with listening without judgment and letting them know their feelings make sense. Validating their experience helps build trust, and from there you can work together to find solutions. If concerns continue or begin to affect their daily life, reaching out for professional support can be an important and caring next step.

Every Child's Experience is Different

Just as every child is unique in the real world, their online experiences will also be different. What works for one child may not work for another. It's important to tailor your approach to your child's individual needs, personality, and maturity level. Understanding your child's online experiences helps to address their unique challenges and successes.

Every child's online experience is shaped by individual factors such as age, interests, and personality. Younger children usually need more guidance and support than teenagers, while a child who enjoys gaming may have very different experiences online than one who mainly uses social media. Personality matters too, for example, an introverted child might take online interactions more to heart or need more support navigating them. Keeping these differences in mind helps parents respond in ways that feel supportive, realistic, and well-matched to their child's needs.

Understanding Neurodiversity and Online Safety

For neurodiverse children (those with autism, FASD, ADHD, dyslexia, etc.), the online world can present unique challenges and opportunities. Some kids with autism, for example, might focus on a narrow set of interests online and spend excessive time on those things. Similarly, kids with ADHD may struggle with impulse control in online environments, potentially sharing personal information or downloading unsafe content.

Tips:

- **Visual Supports:** Use visual aids to explain online safety concepts.
- **Social Stories:** Create social stories to teach appropriate online behaviour.

- **Structured Time:** Set clear limits for online time to help with focus.

Rethinking Monitoring and Privacy

Instead of constantly monitoring your child's online activity, focus on building trust and open communication. Think of it as '*guided participation*' rather than surveillance. Explain why you're concerned about certain online risks, and work together to find solutions. In addition, make sure you help your children understand privacy settings and how to use them. This will empower them to take control of their own online presence.

Monitoring a child's online activity works best when it is open, age-appropriate, and built on trust. For younger children, this may include using devices in shared spaces like the living room or kitchen rather than in bedrooms, sitting nearby while they are online, and helping set up privacy and safety settings together. Parents can also talk regularly about which apps or games are being used and who their child is interacting with. For older children and teens, monitoring may look more like agreed-upon boundaries, such as device-free bedrooms at night, shared expectations around screen time, and ongoing check-ins about online experiences rather than constant supervision. Approaching monitoring as a partnership helps children feel supported while still keeping them safe.

Conversation Starters for Parents

Here are some conversation starters to help you talk to your child about online safety:

- 'What are your favourite things to do online?'
- 'Have you ever seen anything online that made you uncomfortable?'
- 'What would you do if someone online asked you for personal information?'
- 'Who are some adults you trust that you can talk to about online safety?'

Teaching Online Safety as a Life Skill

Online safety isn't a one-time lesson; it's an ongoing conversation. As your child grows and their online experiences evolve, so should your approach to online safety. The goal is to equip them with the skills they need to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly throughout their lives. Emphasize that a digital footprint never disappears, and it's easy to be misunderstood online, and that online relationships are important.

Key Takeaway for Parents

Remember, the goal of online safety is **connection**, not control. Children who feel trusted, heard, supported, and respected are more likely to make safe choices. By fostering a strong relationship with your child, you can help them navigate the online world with confidence and resilience. True online

safety centers relationships, builds skills, recognizes differences, and honours children as developing experts.

Resources

- Visit ProtectKidsOnline at <https://www.protectkidsonline.ca>
- Explore Kids in the Know at <https://www.kidsintheknow.ca>
- Learn with Zoe and Molly Online at <https://zoeandmolly.ca/app/en/>
- Crisis support from Klinik Community Health: <https://klinik.mb.ca>
- Kids Help Phone for support and resources: <https://kidshelpphone.ca>

Additional Tips

- **Lead by example:** Model responsible online behaviour.
- **Stay informed:** Keep up with the latest online trends and safety threats.
- **Be patient:** Learning takes time, and mistakes happen.

Summary

This guide offers a fresh look at how to approach online safety for children in a way that nurtures trust, understanding, and open communication. By focusing on building strong relationships and teaching crucial skills, we can empower our kids to navigate the digital world safely and confidently.