



For additional information, visit [www.canr.msu.edu/outreach](http://www.canr.msu.edu/outreach)

## KEEPING KIDS SAFE: AGES 12-17

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe resource pages were created to help parents and primary caregivers of children and teens learn concrete ways to keep them safe from sexual abuse. These resource pages introduce key concepts and age-appropriate activities that you can use to help protect the children you love and help them build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized.

### TALK ABOUT BODIES

Talk with your child about bodies and about how their body is changing during adolescence. These conversations may be uncomfortable for you and your child, but when you talk openly about bodies your child learns not to be ashamed of their body. They also learn that you're open to having tough conversations with them. Remind your child that they can always come to you with questions and just to talk.

### TEACH YOUR CHILD ABOUT CONSENT

Consent is the act of explicitly giving someone else permission to do a certain activity or for something to happen. When you go to the doctor's office, you may sign a consent form that gives medical personnel permission to perform a procedure on you. Similarly, in relationships both romantic and platonic, each individual has the right to give or deny consent. You may allow someone to hold your hand, hug, or kiss you, or you may decide not to do those things. Consent should be freely given, and should be given verbally as a clear and specific "yes!" If it isn't a clear "yes," then consent cannot be assumed. A person under the influence of alcohol or other drugs cannot give consent.

Every person has the right to deny consent at any time or to change their mind after they have given consent. Asking for and receiving affirmative consent is especially important when it comes to physical touching, especially in dating or romantic relationships. Conversations about consent are a critical component of parenting and will help your child learn about their right to set personal boundaries and the right to expect that others will honor those boundaries.

You can model consent by asking before you touch, hug, or kiss your child, and then respecting their wishes. Many tweens and teens are looking for ways to separate from their parents and other adults and to feel older and more independent. Respect your child's wishes when it comes to showing affection, while also expecting them to be respectful to you.

### Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets we have chosen to use the inclusive words they, their, and them as singular, nongendered pronouns.

We know that families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A family may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. Parents may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else. When we use the words family and parent in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.

**To contact an expert in your area, visit [msue.anr.msu.edu/experts](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/experts) or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464)**

MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer, committed to achieving excellence through a diverse workforce and inclusive culture that encourages all people to reach their full potential. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. Issued in furtherance of MSU Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jeffrey W. Dwyer, Director, MSU Extension, East Lansing, MI 48824. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned.



For example, don't force your child to hug you if they don't want to, but do expect them to acknowledge you in some other way. (For example, by saying "good morning" to you first thing in the morning or by making eye contact when the two of you are talking so you know they're listening.)

Talk with your child early and often about the concepts of consent and respect, even if they aren't yet dating or in a romantic relationship. Discuss how to make sure someone is comfortable with holding hands, hugging, kissing, or engaging in any level of sexual activity and what to do if someone says or otherwise indicates that they aren't comfortable with such activity.

Talk with your child about situations you and your child see on television, in movies, online, and in real life. Encourage them to think critically and ask questions such as, "Did you see the person ask for consent?" "How did the person know whether they had consent?" "What could the character have done differently?" Talking openly with your child encourages them to come talk to you when they are concerned or confused, or when something happens to them that they feel unsure about.

## TEACH & RESPECT BODY BOUNDARIES

Continue (or start, if you haven't already) the conversation with your child about body boundaries. Remind them that they get to decide who touches them and that they always have the right to say "no" whenever someone does something that makes them uncomfortable. Explain that even if they've let someone hug or kiss them in the past, if they no longer want the person to hug or kiss them, they have the right to say "no"—and that the person should respect their decision.

Emphasize that you're willing and able to back up their decision to refuse physical contact of any sort from anyone, including a neighbor, friend, faith leader, classmate, family member, or teacher. Then make sure you're there to believe and support them when they do say "no."



Teach your child to expect respect. Your child should know that they deserve respect from all people who interact with them—peers and adults alike. If they and their boundaries aren't being respected, they should tell you and you will help them. Tell your child that it is always okay to tell someone who is touching them inappropriately or in a way they don't like to stop the touching. Reassure them that they don't need to worry about being rude or disrespectful to an adult if the adult isn't respecting their body boundaries. Make sure your child knows that you'll support them in saying "no" or "stop" in such situations.

Teach appropriate affection. Remind your child that showing affection between an adult and a child never involves physical touch like kissing or touching private parts, undressing or watching someone undress, watching pornography together, having sexual intercourse, or engaging in any other kind of sexual activity.

Honor your child's boundaries. Your tween or teen will probably want more privacy and time alone than they did as young children. Set appropriate family boundaries on this (such as, it's okay for your child to have their bedroom door closed when they're alone, but it's not appropriate when there are friends in the room). Respect their privacy as long as they are following your rules.



## TEACH ABOUT SECRETS

Talk to your child about how keeping some secrets can be fun and keeping others can be harmful. Explain that responsible adults won't ask children to keep secrets from their parents and that your child should tell you if someone asks them to keep a secret from you.



Help your child understand that a surprise isn't the same as a secret. For example, you could explain that a surprise is something you're waiting to share with another person, like planning a birthday event for a friend. Telling the friend about the party before it starts wouldn't make them as happy and excited as waiting to surprise them at the party. Then explain that a secret is something that you're not allowed to share with other people, ever.

Make sure your child knows that they won't get in trouble if they tell you something another adult told them to keep a secret from you, and that you'll support them no matter what. Then, if the occasion arises, be sure to follow through on that promise.

## LISTEN, LISTEN & LISTEN SOME MORE

It's easy for adults to **listen at** children instead of **listening to** and really hearing them. Your child needs to know that you're really listening to them. Listening carefully to your child shows that you love, value, and respect them and their perspective, thoughts, opinions, and ideas. Communicate that respect by sitting down with them, making eye contact, and giving them your full attention when they want or need to talk with you.

Reflect back what you hear your child say; for example, "You sound pretty disappointed that Kiara took a book out of your locker again even after you asked her not to." Ask for clarification when you need it. This helps your child process what they are thinking and feeling and clarify what happened. If your child shares something that is particularly important to them, be sure to follow up with them later to see how they're feeling about the issue and whether they need your help with it.

Create spaces for open communication. When you listen and hear out your child without judgment—even if you don't like or you disagree with what they have to say—they learn that they can trust you with tough issues. Establishing that kind of trust with your child makes them more likely to come to you with problems both big and small. Be attentive and responsive. Depending on the situation, they may want or need help, advice, or just a listening ear.

Listen without judgement. When your child knows that you aren't going to judge, disrespect, or punish them, they're more likely to share personal information such as their struggles and concerns with you. Don't punish your child for openly sharing something just because it frightens or shocks you. If you need some time to compose yourself, tell your child that. You can say, "I appreciate that you came to me with this and I'm glad that you trust me enough to share this with me. I need some time to think about what you've told me. Can we talk about it some more tonight after dinner?"





## ENCOURAGE THE OPEN EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS

Talk about emotions with your tween or teen and ask them to tell you how they're feeling. Share your emotions with them, too (for example, you could tell them that you're feeling frustrated because you had a stressful day at work). Talk about your child's feelings and give them space and permission to express their emotions freely.

Remind your child that all feelings are normal, healthy, and okay.



When your child expresses their feelings, take them seriously.

Dismissing or downplaying your child's emotions by saying something like "It's not that big of a deal—after all, you didn't really like him anyway" after they've broken up with a boyfriend, for example, teaches them two things: not to trust their feelings and that you won't always support them when they're feeling strong emotions. Accepting and validating your child's emotions helps them learn to trust their feelings and that their feelings matter to you.

Teach your child to trust their gut feelings (sometimes called instincts or intuition). Explain that sometimes a person feels an emotion but doesn't know why. You could offer the examples of someone being scared of a new neighbor without having a specific reason for feeling that way and of starting to worry about something that didn't used to bother them. Help your child understand that it's okay to listen to those gut feelings even if they don't know the reasons behind the feelings. Remind them that they can come to you for help talking about these confusing feelings.

Try not to force your child to ignore or go against their gut feelings. If they're telling you that they're uncomfortable going to a friend's house or are feeling wary of an adult in their lives, listen to them. Tell your child that they don't have to be polite if someone is scaring them or making them uncomfortable. Give them permission to say "no," to walk away from the situation, or to set boundaries with the person.

## BE A CONSTANT SUPPORT FOR YOUR CHILD

Stepping in to solve every problem your child has robs them of opportunities to become independent problem solvers. Still, your child needs your presence and your support in their life. When your child genuinely needs adult help with a problem, you need to be there for them with your words and actions.

Reassure them that when they have a problem, you'll be there to help them, then follow through on that pledge by helping them solve their problems.

If you show your child they can trust you to be there when they have little problems, they'll be more likely to come to you for help later when they have bigger problems.



## EMPOWER YOUR CHILD

Gradually give your tween or teen more real choices and let them explore and experiment with more independence and autonomy. When you give your child greater freedom, they feel empowered and respected, and they'll be better prepared to make good choices on the big decisions coming their way in the future.





## BE INVOLVED IN YOUR CHILD'S INTERACTIONS WITH OTHERS

It's important for you to know the adults and young people who interact with or are around your child. Whether they're family or school friends, teachers, or other school employees, coaches, store clerks, after-school care providers, medical professionals, faith leaders, neighbors, or the parents or siblings of your child's friends, you need to get to know them. Never leave your child alone with an unfamiliar teen or adult, even if the person is somehow linked to someone you trust, such as someone who is a friend of your brother.

Do your homework. It is your right and your responsibility to know who is interacting with your child. When your child is or may be interacting with someone new, consider checking out the person by:

- Running a background check.
- Searching for the person's name in the Michigan Sex Offender Registry.
- Asking the person to supply personal references.
- Speaking to people who know and have worked or interacted with that person.

Be present and engaged during your child's first several interactions with a new teen or adult and stay involved in monitoring their subsequent interactions. Watch how the person interacts with your child, with other children, and with adults. Do the interactions seem positive or does something feel off? Does the person engage children while maintaining adult boundaries and providing guidance or discipline when necessary? Is the person overly physical when interacting with children? Check in with your child occasionally by asking questions such as, "How do you like your piano lessons with Ms. G? Is she nice to you? What do you talk about? Where does she sit when you are practicing?"

Make sure your child knows when and how to contact you by phone or text if they're concerned or alarmed about a person or a situation. Reassure them that they can always contact you if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable about a situation. Make sure they know, too, that if they can't reach you they should go to the school office, a neighbor's house, or another agreed-upon safe space.

Trust your own gut feelings. Earlier we talked about teaching children to trust and follow their intuition if something doesn't feel right. You should do the same. If a person or a situation doesn't feel right and you just can't figure out why, follow your instincts. Cancel the appointment, don't drop off your child, make other plans. Following your intuition will help keep your child safe.

## USE TECHNOLOGY SAFELY WHILE DRIVING

Modern motor vehicles are marvels of technology, but some forms of technology can be deadly if used when the vehicle is in motion by a driver of any age, skill level, or years of experience. If your teen is driving, set strict rules on technology use while they are behind the wheel and discuss the consequences for violations. A set of sample rules follow:

- The driver's phone and other electronic devices must be stowed in a purse or pocket, or in the vehicle's glove compartment when the vehicle is in motion.
- Using a phone or other electronic device to talk, text, take photos or videos—or for any purpose other than navigation—when driving is forbidden. Setting or checking navigation information must be done by a passenger in the vehicle or while the vehicle is safely parked.
- Notifications for all apps on all devices (except those needed for navigation) must be set to silent while driving.





## LIMIT & MONITOR TECHNOLOGY USE CLOSELY

Help your child learn about the internet and about using electronic devices and other technology wisely and safely. Some of the key points they need to learn include:

- Nothing they do online or on electronic devices is private. Anything and everything they post online or send electronically can be found and shared by other people. (This applies even to supposedly confidential apps like SnapChat and WhatsApp, and to private messages, which can be shared from screenshots.)
- Their behavior online and on electronic devices has consequences. Explain that if they aren't comfortable with everyone they know learning about something they want to share, they shouldn't post that information online or send it electronically. A good general rule to follow is that if they wouldn't share something in a face-to-face conversation, they shouldn't share it online.
- They should not use or share their personal information online, including their name, current location, address, age, grade in school, school name, and class or other schedule.
- Not everyone they encounter online or on social media is as honest or as friendly as they want people to believe. Some people lie about who they are and about other things, some people bully other people online, and some people try to steal personal information from the people they chat with online.
- It is your right as their parent to know what they are accessing online and on social media. Explain that you will be supervising their technology use by looking at what websites, games, and apps they're using and at the messages they're sending and receiving. Tell them that if you see things that are inappropriate, you'll be intervening immediately. (If that happens, talk with your child about what happened and why it was not okay, and explain what the consequence of their action or behavior will be. The goal is not to punish your child, but to help them learn how to behave appropriately online and when using social media.)
- Help your child understand the potential consequences of someone's personal information, messages, or images being captured and distributed via screenshot without the owner's knowledge or consent. Tell your child that if they receive a screenshot or other inappropriate image or message they should not share or distribute it. Instead, they should tell you about it immediately. Assure them that if they follow those two simple steps, they don't have to fear any negative consequences from you.
- You will be setting limits on their use of technology, social media, and gaming systems, including on where, when, and for how long. Be sure to explain why you're setting these rules (for example, to protect their health and safety and to give them time to study and have a life away from a screen) and what the consequences of breaking the rules will be.

Some rules you may want to consider setting for your child include:

- If they see something online that they think is inappropriate or that makes them uncomfortable, they are to tell a parent right away.
- They are never to answer or respond to a call, text, or message from someone they don't know. If they receive an unsolicited message, they are to tell a parent right away.
- They are never to make plans to meet someone in person that they first met online.
- They are never to download anything without checking with a parent first.
- They will allow their parents to look through their phone at any time to make sure they are following your family technology rules.
- They will share the passwords to their phone and other devices, apps, and social media accounts with their parents.

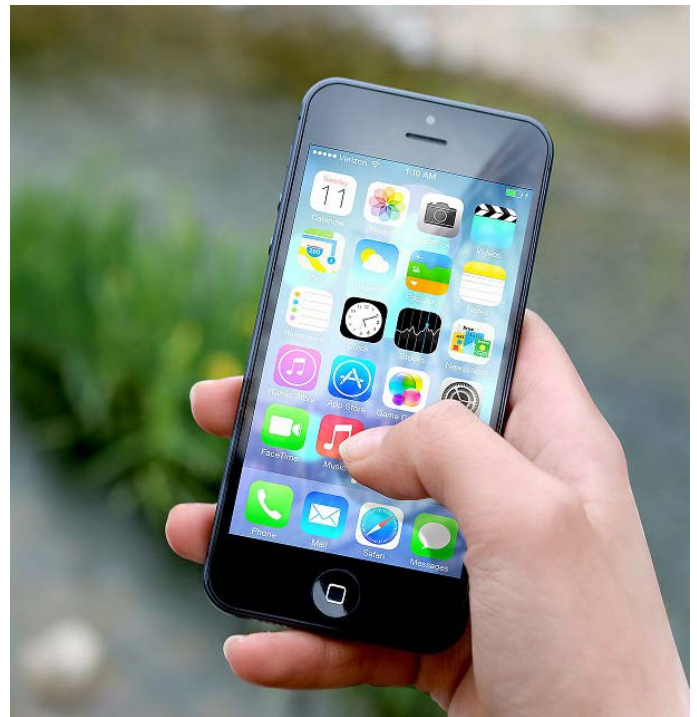


## TEACH ONLINE & TECHNOLOGY ETIQUETTE

You can't rely on creating a list of "set it and forget it" rules to build a family culture of positive online behavior and appropriate technology use. You'll also need a combination of your modeling of appropriate technology use, a positive relationship with your child, consistent expectations, and monitoring. As in any other area of parenting, you'll need to start early to model the positive online behavior and technology use habits you want your child to develop.

Work with your child to create age-appropriate guidelines for when, where, in what situations and settings, and for how long each day family members—including adults—are permitted to use their technology. The guidelines need to cover activities such as doing homework, conducting school- or work-related research, watching television, posting on social media, texting or video chatting, talking on the phone, playing electronic games, and surfing the web. A set of sample family rules for using electronic devices—such as televisions, computers (laptops and desktops), cell phones, smart phones, tablets, gaming systems, and more—follow:

- No electronic device use during meals.
- Electronic devices must be put away during IRL (in real life) conversations.
- Electronic devices must be shut down or set on silent or vibrate mode during family time.
- Technology use during homework time is limited to that related to the homework at hand.
- Electronic devices must be used in common areas of the home, never in bedrooms.
- Taking and posting or otherwise sharing photos or videos of other people (including screenshots of someone else's information) without their consent is forbidden. (**Note:** It's important to empower your child to expect their friends, family, and peers to obtain their consent before taking and posting or otherwise sharing photos or videos of your child, too.)



Post the rules in the kitchen, family room, or other space that everyone visits frequently.

If you or another adult in the household needs to break one of the guidelines, it's important to explain why to your child.

Show your child that it's appropriate (and that it may be essential) to turn off or leave electronic devices in another room, in a drawer, or face down and on silent or vibrate mode while trying to finish a task. (Note: Such measures are absolutely essential for you when you're playing or talking with your child.)

Seeing you step away from your devices will help them learn to do so. Conversely, seeing that you're always tethered to your devices teaches your child that constant use of electronic devices is okay.



## KEEP THESE HELPFUL TIPS IN MIND

Keeping their children safe is a top priority for most parents. You can use the following tips as a guide to help you create environments where you can protect your child and help them learn important skills that will help them stay safe.

- Think about and treat the issues of body safety, personal space, and consent just as you would any other life lesson your child needs to learn. You can't teach it all and they can't learn it all in one sitting. You and your child will need to revisit these issues repeatedly over time.
- Introduce the concepts covered in this fact sheet one at a time.
- Find appropriate times to talk about these concepts. If you or your child are stressed out or experiencing high emotions, wait for another time.
- Think about where your child is developmentally. Ask yourself, "Is my child ready to hear this?" Keep your conversations developmentally appropriate.
- Be open and honest. When you approach your child with openness and honesty, they'll learn that you're trustworthy, committed, and supportive.
- Be present. Being an engaged parent means more than just showing up at your child's school or extracurricular events. It means being an actively involved and interested spectator and participant in your child's life. Ask your child open-ended questions about their activities, their experiences, and their life, such as, "Tell me about your favorite part of your day today—what made it your favorite?" "What did it feel like to build such a tall tower of blocks today?"



## EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, be actively involved in their lives, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming or like they're overkill, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in both protecting your child and helping them build the skills and competencies that will help them stay safe as they get older.



This doesn't mean that you have to prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. It's a reminder, instead, to use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. There are a lot of things you can do to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living and enjoying the world around you.





## Find out more

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out these other MSU Extension resources:

- Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming and Fair Environments—The Be SAFE curriculum is designed to help young people aged 11 to 14 and adults work in partnership to create environments that are physically and emotionally safe. It draws from extensive research from a variety of key disciplines—as well as evidence-based bullying prevention programs. Be SAFE includes engaging activities that promote social and emotional learning and development, address and prevent bullying, and foster positive relationships with peers and adults. Designed for use in out-of-school time settings (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts and afterschool programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.
- Keeping Kids Safe series—These fact sheets are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; and sharing about kids on social media. There are currently four titles in the series:
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17
  - Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). Family media plan. Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2011). Preventing and identifying child sexual abuse—Tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Retrieved from <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/Pages/Parent-Tips-for-Preventing-and-Identifying-Child-Sexual-Abuse.aspx>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2019). Media and children communication toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Pages/Media-and-Children.aspx>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). Resources. Retrieved from <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). Preventing child sexual abuse resources. Retrieved from <https://www.nsvrc.org/preventing-child-sexual-abuse-resources>

---

## Acknowledgments

Authors: Kylie Rymanowicz, Educator in Child and Family Development, MSU Extension, and Christine Heverly, Educator in Child and Youth Development, MSU Extension.

Edited by the MSU Extension Educational Materials Team.