



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

Texting Safety

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 series was created to help parents and primary caregivers learn concrete ways to keep children and teens safe from sexual abuse. The series introduces key concepts and age-appropriate ideas and activities for protecting the children you love and helping them learn and build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized.

Keeping your kids safe is the number one priority of any parent. With technology continuously growing, the importance of talking to your child about texting safety is essential. Most gaming and social media apps have some form of direct messaging; therefore, children are gaining access to direct messaging and texting even before they have a phone through tablets, iPod touches, computers, and other forms of technology.

The prefrontal cortex is the rational part of a child's brain, which is vital in performing executive functions such as impulse control and managing one's emotions. An individual's prefrontal cortex is not fully developed until they are about 25, resulting in children being prone to impulsive decisions.

Children are going to make mistakes on technology. They might make a rash decision, regret a text they sent, or start talking to someone they shouldn't. Although these conversations can be difficult, talking about safe practices is a proactive step in teaching your child responsible decision-making, self-regulation, and social awareness: key components in texting safety. Talking about safe practices builds a foundation of trust and security where children feel more comfortable disclosing when things become inappropriate.

Talking to your child about texting safety has become extremely important as texting has increasingly become the preferred form of communication for youth. When talking about texting safety with your child is it important to consider the following:

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.

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.





Do your research

A parent cannot understand the possible dangers of texting on a specific app if they do not know what it is. Part of teaching your child about safe practices for texting is educating yourself on the social media apps and sites your kids can text or direct message on. In most social media outlets, there are ways to direct message with other individuals. Downloading the applications that your child is using is a great start to educating yourself on the various types of social media as well as their various guidelines and restrictions. The more informed you are about what your child is able to do on the application, the better you can teach them safe practices.

Have this conversation early and often

Think early about the expectations you have about texting safety for your child. Young children often use tablets, and texting and direct messaging can happen on tablets too. If you allow your child to use a tablet for games or various apps, be aware of the access to messaging the various applications have. Additionally, looking into the privacy settings of the apps is a key protective factor in ensuring your young child's safety. For young children, parental controls are a great option if possible. Don't make this a "one-and-done" conversation. Continue to talk to your child about your expectations and changes to your rules or routines about texting.

Remind your child that what they send out is permanent

Although texting and direct messaging is a great way of staying in touch with people, it also leaves behind a *digital footprint*—the path of data that one leaves behind using the internet (Netsafe, 2021). Your digital footprint includes your internet searches, text messages, posts uploaded to social media, websites visited, and much more. Once this data is uploaded, it is permanently on the internet, even if it is deleted.

This aspect of permanence, even when something appears to be deleted, can be challenging for youth. For many people, once something is out of sight, it is out of mind. For example, if a child is texting on Snapchat and direct messages (dms) an inappropriate picture or text, at first it appears to be automatically deleted after the viewer opens the message. However, there are many options to save this photo before it is deleted. Someone can screenshot the picture using their own personal phone or take a photo on someone else's phone.

A Pew Research Center (2009) national survey study found that 15% of youth ages 12 to 17 received sexually suggestive nude or fully nude photos on their cellphones. Additionally, 4% of the sample reported to have sent sexually suggestive nude photos of themselves by text message. As the data shows, youth are sending and receiving inappropriate pictures at all ages. The danger of this is that these pictures can be forwarded to others or saved on the receiver's phone. There are several ways to screenshot texts and photos that are supposed to be automatically deleted including applications that allow individuals to open and screenshot these pictures without the sender being notified.





Sending a message over text is like squeezing the toothpaste out of the tube. Once you send it out you cannot take it back. Using this visual representation is a good way to paint the picture of the impact texting can have on youth's digital footprint and safety.

Encourage open communication with your child

Keeping the lines of communication open with youth is a key protective factor in keeping your child safe virtually. Open communication gives parents the opportunity to provide advice and guidance and allows kids to disclose their emotions. Having open conversations about texting safety and the potential risks that come from developing a harmful digital footprint will equip your child with the tools to make responsible decisions around texting on social media and their phone in the future. Talk about their texting engagement, ask questions, and listen. Just having a simple conversation can make a child feel supported, heard, and cared for. Here are some questions you could consider asking:

- Who are you talking to?
- How do you know this person?
- What information are you sharing?

Having these open conversations with your child gives you the opportunity to determine if any behavior is inappropriate. Children often may find it difficult to open up about experiences that make them uncomfortable; however, making time to have these open conversations gives your child the opportunity to speak up. Children do not have the same practice as adults in telling the difference between appropriate and inappropriate information. Having these open conversations helps children learn your expectation of what is appropriate regarding texting safety.

Connect with empathy

When talking to your child about texting safety, connecting with empathy helps them feel safe and validates their feelings and thoughts. For example, try using phrases such as, "I can tell that you're upset," or "I understand that you're frustrated." Using empathy to see your child's perspective makes them feel acknowledged while building a foundation of love, trust, and connectedness that makes you approachable. When your child feels safe to share information with you, it is much easier to keep them safe.

Set expectations around texting

Set your rules in place before your child has access to using a phone. If you make up the rules after they have already been granted a phone, the rules can feel like punishment. By proactively establishing what you will and won't allow regarding texting, your child is completely aware of the rules and consequences. By establishing these rules you're helping your child build the connection between their actions and consequences.

As your child gets older, your expectations around texting may need to change. While some rules may disappear, others may need to be added to keep your child safe. For example, when your child is a toddler, your expectation for screen time might be significantly lower than when





they are a teenager. On the other hand, you might have not had any expectations for texting strangers because you always supervised their technology usage; however, as they grow older and become more independent, you will need to have these conversations.

Some texting boundaries to consider follow:

- Develop a list of people your child can text.
 - Do they know them personally? Is there a mutual friend?
 - Are all of those numbers in their phone contact list?
- Establish sites or apps they are allowed to use to communicate.
 - Are they only allowed to use sites with parental control and privacy settings?
- Set times when they are allowed and not allowed to text.
 - Can they text in the morning, at mealtimes, after school, evenings, late nights?
 - What are your child's strengths and weaknesses? For example, if getting to school on time is an issue for your child, consider making a rule about no texting in the morning until their backpack is packed and they are dressed for school.
- Determine what information is appropriate to text.
 - Do you model the behavior that you expect your child to use while texting?
 - What is your child allowed to text about to family, neighbors, or other kids? (For example, it's okay to text a family member about your after-school schedule but it's not okay to text neighbors with information about where you are going to be.)
- Determine the social media sites they are allowed to text on.
- Decide when they are allowed to get a phone or tablet.
 - Why does your child need a phone? What are the needs and benefits of a form of communication at this age?
- Establish where it is appropriate and not appropriate to text.
 - Can they text in the bedroom, in bathrooms, while driving?
- Establish when your child can share their location as some apps are set to share your location automatically.

Follow through with your rules

Be consistent with your rules and consequences. If your household rule is that phones have to be out of the bedroom after 10 p.m. or you lose phone privileges the next day and your child breaks that rule, you must follow through with your predetermined consequence. If you are constantly allowing your child to break the rules, they will not understand that behaviors have consequences.





Teach your child to evaluate what information is being sent through their text

Although texting is convenient for quick messages, it loses the component of having context with the message. Text messages are open to interpretation from the reader since there are no nonverbal cues or emphasis on certain words. For example, if someone texts, “Do whatever you want,” one person might read this with a negative connotation, whereas another person may read it thinking they are supporting their decision.

Talk to your child about phone etiquette

You should talk not only about your own household rules, but also about the social norms of phone etiquette with your child. Some of these include putting your phone away when talking to others, silencing your phone when attending meetings or quiet areas (such as in a library or in class), and considering how your tone of voice will be perceived.

Remind your child to be kind through their texts.

To help youth think about being kind, have them consider the following guidelines:

- Take a moment to pause before responding.
- Consider if what you are sending could be taken out of context or someone might think it is hurtful.
- Always ask for clarification when something doesn’t make sense, or might seem hurtful or hard to interpret.
- Apologize if something is misinterpreted by someone.
- Seek help from an adult if unsure how to respond.
- If you can’t say something nice, say nothing at all.
- If a text is hateful or bullying, tell an adult, but do not respond to the text.

CONCLUSION

A survey found that 59% of teens have experienced some type of harassment online and 90% of teens agree that online bullying is an issue for their age group (Pew Research Center, 2018). Cyberbullying is a prominent issue among teens. It is not only important to teach youth to be kind through technology, but also to speak up. Often when youth are being bullied online, they are afraid of the consequences that could come from tattling. However, if you have built a foundation of trust and security with your child, they are more likely to come to you when they are being cyberbullied.

Most parents' number one goal is keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task as it is inevitable that your child is going to make mistakes with their technology. We are all human. The best thing you can do to keep your child safe online is to pay attention, be actively involved, and make informed decisions about





things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in protecting your child and helping them build the skills that will help them stay safe as they get older. You don't have to prevent your child from texting anyone. Instead, have these conversations, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. You can do a lot of things to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from enjoying technology and the benefits it can bring.

REFERENCES

Netsafe. (2021) *What is a digital footprint?*. <https://www.netsafe.org.nz/digital-footprint/>

Pew Research Center. (2009). *Teens and sexting*.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2009/12/15/teens-and-sexting/>

Pew Research Center. (2018). *A majority of teens have experienced some form of cyberbullying*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/09/27/a-majority-of-teens-have-experienced-some-form-of-cyberbullying/>

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** (<https://bit.ly/36CwUk7>)—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 from 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 after-school programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.
- **Keeping Kids Safe series** (<https://bit.ly/3jG8JFo>)—The fact sheets in this series 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; sharing about kids on social media; and recognizing and preventing grooming by child sexual predators. There are currently 11 titles in the series:
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5: <https://bit.ly/3zLjmhG>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11: <https://bit.ly/3f8ecEH>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17: <https://bit.ly/3zRbWJB>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media: <https://bit.ly/3f9toBl>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators: <https://bit.ly/3ib4vXZ>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children: <https://bit.ly/3BWYRFc>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, and Communities: <https://bit.ly/3f8F7jM>
 - Keeping Youth Safe Virtually: Best Practices: <https://bit.ly/2VI9Cvr>
 - Keeping Kids Safe: Characteristics of Child Sexual Offenders: <https://bit.ly/3Bh2gJa>





- [Keeping Kids Safe: Female Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse:](https://bit.ly/3sNN17J)
- [Keeping Youth Safe: Warning Signs of Child Sexual Abuse:](https://bit.ly/2XR2vMC)

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). *Family media plan.* <https://bit.ly/3iE9Wf1>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). *Resources.* <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *Preventing child sexual abuse resources.* <https://bit.ly/34zyAYW>
-

Acknowledgments

Author: Christine Heverly, Extension Educator in Child and Youth Development, MSU Extension; Kate O'Connell, Intern, MSU Extension; and Kylie Rymanowicz, Extension Educator in Child and Family Development, MSU Extension

Edited by the MSU Extension Educational Materials Team for MSU Extension
(extension.msu.edu)

