

Parents have an essential role to play in supporting their teen regarding online issues. This resource will provide you with some insight into the challenges youth face such as rumour spreading, name calling, online impersonation, sharing of intimate or embarrassing images, doxing, as well as being the target of threats, blackmail, sexist or racist language. Additionally, suggestions are provided on ways to support your teen in dealing with these issues

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Negative actions on any networked technology can have a harmful effect on young people.

Online issues are sometimes downplayed with the suggestion that teens can just 'turn off' their devices or platforms if they don't like what's happening but these issues can have a significant impact on a youth's mental and physical health as well as broader effects on their lives and our society as a whole.

### First, what **NOT** to do:

- **Don't dismiss what's happening as *just online*.** What happens online can be just as real as anything offline. Telling a youth that they should, "Just stop using," a particular social network can make things worse as it denies the impact of what's happening and ignores the importance of networked devices to young people. Additionally, online experiences are often accompanied by real life experiences.
- **Try not to overreact.** Taking away a device or attempting to keep a teen off the Internet will leave them feeling more victimized. They may feel punished for confiding in you, causing them to avoid letting you know again if they are ever feeling threatened. As well, cutting off or limiting access to the Internet may actually make a youth more vulnerable and less resilient to future issues.
- **Don't blame them for what has happened (*even if they are partly responsible*)** While there will be a time in the future to discuss poor decision making online, when a teen first comes to you with a problem, be supportive and reassure them that you will help – or they may not come to you next time.
- **Never spy on your teen online.** Teens are very adept at avoiding surveillance and may resort to fake accounts or connect to unsupervised spaces to get privacy and will be much less likely to come to you with a problem. For those who have shown poor online judgement in the past, surveillance software may be appropriate but only if you are upfront that you are doing it and why.
- **Don't rely on scare tactics** when talking about online. Teens are aware that the examples you may cite rarely happen, leaving you looking unrealistic and *out-of-touch*. It may keep them from coming to you if they do need help in the future.
- **Don't leave the rules and limits up to your teen.** Youth generally want to know what the rules are and to have them communicated clearly. Have a focus on flexibility and what to do if a problem does occur, not a zero-tolerance approach that punishes the teen.
- **Don't assume youth know everything about how their online tools and platforms work.** They may quickly learn how to use them and be more comfortable online than their parents but still may not fully understand the more complicated tools and settings or their consequences. Teens are still learning to manage their emotions and relationships (online as well as offline) and continue to rely on your guidance and support.

## Next, what to say and do:

### ONLINE HARASSMENT

This is one of the most common problems faced by youth, taking the form of threats of violence, embarrassment, releasing of personal information (*doxing*), repeated unwanted contact (*cyberstalking*) or verbal abuse:

- **Block or mute:** Strangers who harass (troll) usually have only one point of contact, open social networks like Instagram, Snapchat or gaming sites. An effective way to deal with this form of harassment is to simply **block** (*unfriend* from a social network to cut off contact) or **mute** (*unfollow* someone to no longer see what they post). Most social networking sites offer solutions to not seeing someone's posts or keep them from seeing yours. Visit the site's safety centre to learn what privacy and safety features are available, keeping in mind that these can frequently change. It is worth keeping evidence of the harassment in case the blocking or muting does not end the problem and the youth needs to take things further.
- Blocking or muting may not be a practical solution if the source of the problem is a friend or peer. Either way, encourage your teen to **gather evidence** of the harassment (e.g. save texts or take screenshots of anything that might disappear - visit [www.take-a-screenshot.org](http://www.take-a-screenshot.org) to learn how to do this on different browsers and devices).
- **Report:** The next step is to report the harasser to the social network or platform(s) where the harassment is occurring. Make sure to state that the harassment is a violation of the site's terms and conditions.
- Encourage your teen **not to retaliate**. Not only does this encourage further harassment it also makes the youth's case weaker when reporting to the social network.
- **Inform the RCMP:** If blocking and/or reporting fails to resolve the problem, or if the harasser is threatening violence, making the teen feel unsafe or attempting blackmail (e.g. threatening to forward embarrassing photos of the youth unless they do what the harasser wants) you should go to the RCMP with your concern.

### DIGITAL DRAMA

Distinguishing between harassment and drama is not always easy. The key difference is that drama usually involves people of roughly similar *social power*. Instances of drama often blow over but when more people witnessing the drama side with one individual over another, the drama can turn into harassment.

- Youth are sometimes reluctant to take action in situations of drama because they are concerned as being seen to *not have a sense of humour* or *taking things too seriously* as the most common explanation given for online meanness is, "*I was just joking around.*" Something that starts out as a joke, however, can escalate.
- Suggest your teen consider the following steps to resolve drama that has become uncomfortable:
  - ✓ Help your teen to consider if it's possible the other person didn't intend to hurt them
  - ✓ Encourage youth to talk to each other face-to-face before responding online. In person communication often helps others understand more clearly how we feel and helps create a feeling of empathy (emphasize the importance of not retaliating online – see above)
  - ✓ Point out that reaching out to other friends online for alliance or backup usually results in an escalation of conflict
  - ✓ In situations where the drama continues to grow or worsens, consider the steps above
  - ✓ If your teen asks you not to get involved regarding an online issue for fear it will make matters worse, carefully consider the impact and be sure to be upfront about any action you feel you do have to take

Consider having regular 'digital family meetings' to discuss rules and expectations to maintain a positive digital footprint as well as healthy practices such as no technology in bedrooms and a central overnight charging station for everyone's phones and devices. One way to help stay connected with your teen regarding the online platforms they use is to ask them to help you set up an account. Have them show you: - how to change the default privacy settings - limit who can see a post or photo - how to tag and de-tag a photo - block someone from contacting you - make a report to the site manager

#### Helpful resources:

<https://www.mediasmarts.ca/>  
<https://www.protectchildren.ca/app/en/>



These websites contain helpful resources (including the two listed below) which have more detailed and additional examples of the suggestions made in this document