

Excerpt from *Safety and the Internet*

CANADIAN CENTRE for CHILD PROTECTION (www.protectchildren.ca), Cybertip!ca - Canada's National Tipline (www.cybertip.ca), Kids in the know (www.kidsintheknow.ca)

GET INVOLVED Learn What Your Adolescent is Doing Online

Stay engaged with your adolescent. S/he may be reluctant to communicate openly with you; it's important to keep lines of communication open and continue building your relationship. Encourage your adolescent to come to you in times of need; show interest in what is important to him/her, and be aware of his/her online activity.

Learn how to adjust/increase privacy settings. Most online journals, blogs, and social networking sites have privacy settings that determine who can and can't view a user's profile and information. Learn how to use and increase privacy settings.

View your adolescent's Instant Messaging (IM) logs (e.g. Live Messenger, AIM, Yahoo! Messenger). For example, open Live Messenger and log in as the user you want to track, select Tools> Options> Messages and near the bottom is the Message History setting. Ensure that the box is ticked next to "Automatically keep a history of my conversations". The location of the saved conversations is also shown here. Open the folder where the logs are saved to review your adolescent's IM activity.

Check your adolescent's profile on free email accounts. For example, you can check member profiles of Hotmail users at <http://spaces.msn.com> and Yahoo! Users at <http://search.profiles.yahoo.com>. Type the username in advanced people search.

Check to see that your adolescent's IM program is set up so that no one can begin speaking to him/her without his/her permission. In Live Messenger, select Tools> Options> Privacy. Ensure that the box is ticked next to "Only people on my Allow List can see my status and send me messages".

HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT and Personal Safety

As your adolescent gets older, you will notice changes in his/her behaviour and interests. While it's exciting to see your adolescent seek more independence, there are new personal and online safety concerns as well. The following section outlines common characteristics of adolescents 13-15 years old.

The Growing Personality

- Values acceptance and belonging as s/he expands his/her identity
- Heightened focus on his/her appearance and the opinions of others
- Is very sensitive, easily humiliated, and is extremely concerned about social judgment
- Demonstrates "pseudo-maturity" by appearing to "handle" more than developmentally capable
- Seeks deeper relationships (may use the Internet to confide in others)
- Distances him/herself from parents to form his/her identity
- Takes huge emotional risks in search of his/her identity
- Explores sexuality; it's natural for your adolescent to be curious about sexuality, and s/he may want to look at photos and explore sexual subjects
- Demands privacy
- Focuses on whether his/her behaviour conforms to the behaviour of others, not whether it is right or wrong
- Is positively influenced by the presence of trusted adults

Online Activities

- Uses Instant Messaging, email, weblogs, etc. to communicate with others
- Plays online games with opponents
- Uses webcams and digital cameras to take and send pictures
- Uses cell phones (talking to friends, web surfing, taking pictures, text messaging)
- Uses peer to peer programs to download music, games and videos (e.g. Limewire)
- Creates personal pages for social networking sites (Facebook, Myspace)

As a Parent, What Can You Do?

- Limit the amount of time your adolescent spends online
- Use filtering software (for more information, visit www.cybertip.ca)
- Monitor your adolescent while s/he is online; consider putting the computer in a common area (kitchen, family room, etc.) of your home. Despite appearing to be able to "handle" most situations, your adolescent requires and unconsciously seeks adult guidance
- Know your adolescent's login information and email addresses. What username or character names has your adolescent given him/herself? Does it provide identifying characteristics or information about him/her or his/her hobbies (shygirl, sexygirl14, etc.)?
- Know who your adolescent is communicating with online
- Monitor webcam use and any posting or exchanging pictures online
- Encourage open communication at home and be conscious of his/her sensitivity to social judgment. S/he may be hesitant to share personal experiences

What Should You Talk To Your Adolescent About?

- Set the expectation that you will monitor your adolescent's online activities, as the Internet is a public place
- Discuss respect and dignity and how your adolescent portrays him/herself online
- Explain the importance of being careful with pictures your adolescent posts or sends online; reinforce that once a picture is sent, control over what happens to it is lost
- Explain how experimenting in a public place like the Internet can have irreversible, embarrassing consequences
- Warn your adolescent about individuals s/he chats with online who start talking about sex, puberty, ask "weird" questions or request dirty pictures. Tell him/her to trust his/her instincts and block anyone who makes him/her feel uncomfortable
- Explain to your adolescent that it's illegal to threaten someone online or offline. If someone threatens him/her online, s/he needs to tell a trusted adult
- Discuss the inaccurate representations of healthy relationships in the media, and explain the true qualities of healthy relationships (see www.kidsintheknow.ca)
- Tell your adolescent not to share his/her password with anyone, and that his/her password should be a combination of numbers and letters (both upper- and lower-case). Explain that popup ads and malicious sites appear legitimate, but that email and messenger providers will never ask for your adolescent's username and password

Exposure to Sexually Explicit Material

Don't be alarmed if your adolescent is interested in exploring sexual material. It's important, however, to be aware that some materials found on the Internet can be explicit. Adolescents may find sexually offensive material and use it as a manual to learn about sexuality. Discuss the components of a healthy relationship and healthy sexuality. Ensure your adolescent understands that s/he can talk to you about anything on the Internet without fear of losing Internet privileges.

Public Nature and Permanence of the Internet

Adolescents are using the Internet to test limits and experiment with identity, often underestimating the public nature of the Internet. An adolescent will engage in private conversations and share private information, unaware of the lasting consequences of his/her behaviour. Teach your adolescent that once material is sent online, control over what happens to the material is lost, and subsequent exposure can be devastating.

Building Relationships Online

An adolescent uses the Internet to connect and position themselves socially - even experimenting with dating relationships. Boundaries are often tested in this environment, and lines are more readily crossed. Adolescents can quickly find themselves in situations they think they can handle, yet do not have the capacity to deal with. It's important for parents to stay emotionally connected to your adolescent, and pay close attention to any significant changes in behaviour.

For more information, see www.kidsintheknow.ca.

Threats and Coercion

Individuals seeking to exploit adolescents may use threats to increase compliance that could result in the adolescent sending a naked image of her/himself. Talk to your adolescent about the use and illegal nature of online threats. Explain to your adolescent that s/he should never comply with threats, and to seek a trusted adult for help.

Lack of Boundaries

Boundaries are quickly crossed online. Individuals looking to victimize adolescents quickly turn conversations sexual, asking personal questions about puberty and development. Adolescents don't know how to deal with the offender, which can lead to online exploitation. Make sure your adolescent knows to stop any conversation that is uncomfortable and tell a trusted adult.