

Common Sense on Talking Safely Online

What's the Issue?

Kids love connecting with others online. Most young people talk online only with their friends and family. But as a parent, you might be concerned that a stranger with bad intent (predator) could contact your child.

Predatory behavior is when people contact your child on the Internet (mostly through instant messaging, chat rooms, or social networking sites) and attempt to “groom” your child for a relationship. These people try to win children’s trust by hiding their true identities. They may try to get kids into creepy or dangerous situations by pretending to have similar interests, giving them compliments, and letting them talk about anything they want. They typically tell children to keep the friendship secret, and they may even threaten kids if they tell anybody. As the relationship develops, the predator may send pictures, ask a child to send them pictures, and then ask to meet face to face.

Why Does It Matter?

Teaching your child to be alert about how predators groom their targets is crucial to keeping your child safe. With very small kids, it is best if you are present when they are online. At this age, you may choose to block your kids from talking online, or create strict rules for them to follow about who they can talk to. For older elementary school children, you may choose to give them more freedom after first discussing how to stay safe online.

common sense says

Discuss responsible online behavior. Establish rules for appropriate instant messaging and chatting online, and explain that you’re enforcing those rules because you care about their safety. You may want to involve an older sibling who can model good online behavior and can stay involved in their younger siblings’ online lives.

Establish rules for who’s okay to talk to. Online talk should generally be with people your children know, like family and friends.

Set boundaries for what topics are okay to discuss. Kids shouldn’t answer questions online that make them feel uncomfortable. They also shouldn’t talk about adult topics with strangers.

Make sure your child feels safe telling a trusted adult. If something creepy or inappropriate happens online, kids need to know they won’t get in trouble if they tell an adult they trust. Also, avoid banning them from the computer. Kids are less likely to tell parents when they experience a problem on the computer if they think as a result they won’t be allowed to use it.

Remind your kids not to give strangers private information. Kids should never give out their name, address, school, phone number, email, pictures, or anything that could identify who they are.

Block, ignore, or leave. Most kids know to brush off unwanted contact. Encourage this behavior.

Look for warning signs. Does your child seem withdrawn, emotionally distant, spend endless hours online, or seem to be hiding something? The kids who get sucked into inappropriate online relationships often show warning signs. They might be hiding an online relationship they don’t want you to know about. If you think this might be happening, ask your child about it!