Youth and Internet Safety During COVID-19

More than ever, children and teens are using the internet and social media as the primary tool for social interaction and for school work. We may think human trafficking is not happening in our own backyards; however, with the world on the internet, the world is our backyard. It is essential that church leaders, parents, and those who work with children are informed about the realities of youth and internet safety. We must educate our communities about the tactics of traffickers online, help prevent human trafficking, and be equipped to be a part of the solution in ending it.

Reality check:

- 1 in 10 children will experience sexual abuse by the age of 18
- 70% of child victims are advertised online

PRACTICAL TIPS

Here are some tips you can use to educate and reach vulnerable children and teens in your community:

Create agreed upon rules for internet use with children and youth.

The internet is ever-present and while we know that there are many positive benefits, we also are aware that dangers come along with it. We would not allow our children to play on the streets without teaching them basic road safety. The same principle needs to be true for the internet. We need to teach our children basic safety when it comes to screen time. A good way to do that is by creating an agreed-upon (between parents and children) set of rules for internet use. Consider these questions when composing your internet use rules:

WHO are your children allowed to communicate with online? Parents should know who their children are friends with on Facebook and who they are chatting with in chat groups. Anyone outside of your child's social network who tries to contact or engage with your child online should be questioned immediately.

WHAT Decide together what websites they are and not allowed to access.

WHEN Set guidelines for when children are allowed to be on the internet. When are phones turned off at night and turned back on in the morning? How much time do they get on the computer each day, each week? Children should never be getting up in the middle of the night to go online.

WHERE Decide where they are allowed to use the internet – at a friend's house? At the public library? Only at home?

WHY Discuss the reasons why your child needs to be careful when they are online. Compare their need to be careful of strangers while playing outside to their time studying, gaming, or using the internet.

HOW Under what circumstances are they allowed to be online? How much time are they allowed to be online? Ensure that their time online is not a substitute for time together with you.

All computers and electronic devices (including smart phones) with internet access should be located in the home where parents / guardians can supervise.

Computers and electronic devices with internet access should not be located in bedrooms or other places where adults cannot supervise. Locating electronic devices with internet access in bedrooms and other low-traffic areas of the house provides opportunities for potential harm to come to your children. As a parent, you would never leave your child unsupervised with a stranger. They could get hurt. The same mentality applies for supervising children during internet use.

Your children are NOT completely safe if they only visit children-friendly chat rooms.

Nothing is completely safe and child-proof on the web. People wanting to entice children usually are in child-friendly chat rooms looking for them. They also use false profiles to engage and create an online relationship with children. It is difficult to verify that everyone is who they say they are online.

Check your children's browser history and phone texts.

Part of protecting your children is knowing where and what sites they have accessed online – this includes computers, smart phones, and any electronic devices with internet access. This simple step can prevent real harm from happening to them in the long-term. You don't need to do it covertly; instead, sit down with your children and get them to show you the sites they are accessing. It will help you know where children are going on the web and will also help you identify if your children have stumbled onto a porn site while doing homework or accessing a children's website. Also, read through the texts being sent between your children and their friends. This will help ensure that they are only texting with people they know and are not being asked to do something inappropriate (i.e. sexting).

Make a plan with your children should someone request their phone number or ask to meet in person.

We already tell our children and youth not to talk to, share phone numbers, address, or any personal information with, or go with strangers without telling us. This principle should be applied online. Children and youth should never talk to someone they don't already know from their social network. All new online acquaintances and friends should be shared with and approved by parents. It is important for parents to monitor this closely, as predators often pretend to be a child or youth online to lure them into conversation and a relationship. It should be stressed with children and youth that they should never share their phone numbers, addresses, or any personal information online.

Have your children choose appropriate screen / user names and email addresses.

Most children want to create screen / user names and email addresses that they consider to be cool and reflective of them. But sometimes these types of screen / user names and email address can actually tell online predators personal details about a child or youth. Refrain from using names, year of birth, age, or any phrases that would hint at them being a child (i.e. ilikeponies).

Speak through the consequences of sexting that your child / youth could face and the realities of "sextortion."

Children's and youth's brains are still developing, so they may think it is funny or cool to ask or send a naked picture to another person without truly thinking through the repercussions and long-term consequences of this choice. Checking a child / youth's text messages and providing supervision for internet-using electronics helps to decrease these risks. Once an image is sent, those looking to exploit children will threaten to expose a child or teen by demanding more images. This is known as "sextortion." This kind of exploitation is a powerful trap and unlikely to stop without intervention from law enforcement. Having this discussion with your child or youth in advance can help protect them and help them feel comfortable enough to tell you if this happens to them. They need to know that they can come to you (or a trusted adult) right away if they have been asked to sext, without fear of consequences.

Spend time with your children and teens doing activities that build trust.
Create and prioritize activities that affirm and communicate a sincere interest in who they are. Ensure that as a family, entertainment is not restricted to the virtual world and that it includes sharing as a family in creative bonding, in joy, and in support for one another.

If you or someone you know needs help, call the Human Trafficking National Hotline in the United States of America at 888-373-788 or the Canadian National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-833-900-1010.

*If outside the USA or Canada, the above numbers will help you connect with the hotline for your country.

INTERNET SAFETY RESOURCES[1]

o [Common Sense Media](#)
o [ConnectSafely](#)
o [Enough is Enough](#)
o [Internet Safety 101](#)
o [Netsmartz](#) (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children parent resources)
o [Educate and Empower Kids](#)
o [End Sexual Exploitation](#)
o [Sexting Prevention Course](#)
o [WebWatcher](#)
o [TeenSafe](#)
o [Protect Young Minds](#)

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1 https://sharedhope.org/