

Keep Children Safe from Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse During the Pandemic

School closures across Canada due to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in children staying home and spending more time online. Though there are many benefits for children using the Internet (e.g. digital literacy, finding support networks), more time online may put them at an increased risk for various forms of [online sexual exploitation and abuse](#). This can occur whether children are communicating with someone older or someone their own age, with a stranger or someone they know (e.g. peers, family members).

Several pandemic-related factors contribute to the risk of online sexual exploitation and abuse:

- Due to physical/social distancing, children are using the Internet more to connect socially with their friends and family. This may include video calls, live-streams, sharing photos, social media, online gaming, and online chats.
- Supervision of children's online activities may be limited. For instance, younger children whose parents are considered "essential workers" may be looked after by older siblings or grandparents who do not monitor what children consume online. In other cases, parents may be busy working from home or navigating pandemic-related challenges (e.g. job loss, mental health concerns, caring for their own parents).
- Trusted adults outside of the home (e.g. school staff) are no longer in regular contact with children and have fewer opportunities to observe potential warning signs of online sexual exploitation and abuse (e.g. behavioural changes, talking excessively about sexual topics, change in friendships).
- Children navigating additional adversities brought on or exacerbated by the pandemic, such as child maltreatment, parental substance use, or mental health issues, may be particularly vulnerable to online exploitation tactics (e.g. lovebombing, offers of protection).

Parents and caregivers can help increase children's safety and reduce risks in the following ways:

Teach Safe Practices for Using the Internet

- Speak with your children about online safety. Share how the Internet can be fun and how it can also be dangerous. This includes talking about the apps, games, and sites they use and how to protect themselves on those platforms. Remind your children not to share their name, age, address, and other private information with others online.
- Reassure your children that it is never their fault if they receive unwanted and inappropriate contact online, that the blame lies with the person contacting and seeking to harm children, and that there are steps you and your child can take to create safety online.

- Ask your children to let you or another trusted adult know if someone is asking for photos or to engage in activities of a sexual nature. Let them know this won't affect their Internet privilege and that their safety is the most important thing to you.
- Encourage your children to let a trusted adult know if they encounter online sexual exploitation of a peer (e.g. circulating nude photos of a classmate). Reassure them that by telling, they are helping to protect someone who is being hurt.
- Recognize that online sexual exploitation can be committed by anyone, even by those who you and your children may initially feel comfortable having contact with, such as family, close friends, babysitters, coaches, and community leaders.

Regulate Internet Access

- Set up computers in public areas and encourage your children to use their electronic devices in a room accessible to the whole family (e.g. family room, kitchen).
- [Familiarize yourself](#) with existing parental controls and privacy settings that can be turned on for apps, and online gaming systems. Ask your children to teach you how the apps and games work. Sit together to set up new accounts, or review existing accounts, and turn on privacy settings that can allow users to approve or deny followers/friends, restrict who can view their content and profile information, and limit incoming messages to friends/followers only.
- For younger children, supervise Internet activities and set up games or age-appropriate sites for them in advance. Some social media platforms now have versions for children, like "YouTube Kids" and "Messenger Kids," which have different safety settings to limit what can be shared (e.g. videos, pictures), require more parental involvement, and feature age-appropriate content.
- Set expectations for time online and establish guidelines around online messaging, social media, live-streaming, and gaming that both of you agree on. It may be helpful to develop a [family media plan](#) that covers when, where, and how your children can safely use the Internet.
- Ask your children about how their time was spent on the Internet in the same way you would ask about their day at school or time spent with friends. For instance, encourage them to tell you about the people they've talked with online that day.
- Be open with your children about what you are monitoring and why. Let them know it is your responsibility to keep them safe.

Promote Healthy Relationships

- Discuss with your children the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Remind them that healthy relationships involve respect, dignity, honesty and kindness and that they do not have to share sexual images/photos to be a good friend or because someone they know and trust asked for those images.
- Teach your children about [consent](#) and saying “no” to inappropriate requests. This also includes teaching them to respect other people’s boundaries and autonomy. This is equally as important in the virtual world as it is in the physical world.

Recognize Possible Signs of Abuse and Reach out for Help

- Recognize that online sexual exploitation can affect any child even if you think your children “know better”. Ongoing conversations about Internet safety and check-ins are essential, especially when your child moves into the next developmental stage and when new technology emerges.
- Be aware of potential signs of online sexual exploitation and abuse. This may include changes in use of electronic devices, attempts to hide online activity, behavioural changes, receiving gifts in the mail, and accepting virtual currency for in-app purchases.
- Learn about and make available resources that your children may feel comfortable connecting with if they want to talk to someone (e.g. post the Kids Help Line on the fridge).
- Seek support from community agencies if you are worried about your child being in a sexually exploitative situation. You do not have to do address it alone.
- Protect all children; report suspected online enticement or sexual exploitation of a child to the police or to [Cybertip](#). An individual may target multiple children for abuse.

Spending more time online during the pandemic may be necessary for your children (e.g. online learning) and it can be a great way for them to learn, have fun, and maintain their connections. However, parental supervision and open, honest communication with your children remains essential. Taking some time every day to review online activity and to chat with them can increase their safety and encourage positive Internet use.

For more information, please check out these resources:

Self/Peer Exploitation: A Resource Guide for Families Addressing Self/Peer Exploitation

https://www.cybertip.ca/pdfs/SPEX_FamilyGuide_Web_single_en.pdf

COVID-19 Global Online Safety Advice for Parents and Carers

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/covid-19/international-advice-for-parents>