KEEPING OUR CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE

I have shared information about keeping children and youth safe online previously. However, with the increased reliance on technology during COVID-19, we could use an updated reminder of basic safety and appropriate digital citizenship.

WHAT IS DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP?

The online dictionary definition of DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP is "the responsible use of technology by anyone who uses computers, the internet and digital devices to engage with society on any level".

When it comes to safe use of technology, Northern Gateway Public Schools Administrative Procedure 140 1.3 states

> *Accessing, uploading, downloading, transmitting, displaying or distributing obscene, violent, illegal or sexually explicit language is unacceptable. All users are responsible for their appropriate use of resources in all areas of the school program.*

DANGERS

With just a click, we can have access to any terrifying, vile, twisted and horrific image. It is not a matter of IF our children will witness extreme violence, perversion and brutality, it is a matter of WHEN. I do not say this to cause fear. Rather, we as parents and/or grandparents, must protect our children. If not us, then whom? We need to arm ourselves with the knowledge and skills to teach our children how to report obscene sites, reject requests from strangers, block inappropriate followers, and talk to you when they see something upsetting.

HELPFUL SAFETY HINTS

Keep devices and computers in high-traffic areas of your home. The Canadian Pediatric Society tells us that solitary use increases the risks for exposure to negative or harmful content.

Talk, talk and talk some more with your children. It is never too early or late to start conversations staying safe online. See "Discussion Starters" below.

Set limits and boundaries. Just like giving bedtimes and curfews, children need to know what you expect online, time limits, sites to go on, etc. According to the Canadian Pediatric Society, for children under 5 years of age, screen time should be less than 1 hour per day. Screens should be avoided at least 1 hour before bedtime, and "screen-free" times must be incorporated daily, for activities such as exercise, sports, board games or family meal time.

Surf the internet together. Let your children show you what they like to do online.

Be a good digital citizen. Start talking with your kids early about being respectful and responsible online. Discuss your family values in relation to the acceptable uses of technology. Use your own online behavior as a **role model**. Limit the amount of personal information you share and keep a healthy balance between time spent on screens and face to face relationships.

Set strong passwords for all devices. It's important to NOT use the same passwords for critical accounts, and to change passwords regularly. Reinforce with your children that they should NEVER share their passwords with anyone other than you, not even their best friend. **Know your child's passwords**.

Set privacy settings. They should be at the highest possible setting for each site and each app your child is accessing.

Share with care. Younger children should not post personal information — including their name, phone number, email address, postal address, school, or photos without consulting with you.

Talk with older children about the information they are posting. Putting personal information online leaves them open to cyberbullying or to people who want to take advantage of them. Social networks (Tik Tok, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.) are a great way to connect with other people, but children need to consider carefully what they post on these sites. Reinforce the message that the internet is *FOREVER* and that information they post can be shared with *ANYONE*. In addition, be knowledgeable on the age requirements of apps, games, movies and television shows. Most social media apps are a minimum of 13 years old. Many apps, games and Netflix shows are Mature due to violence, sex and profanity.

Don't respond to a bully or try to retaliate. *STOP, BLOCK, TELL* is a good rule. Teach your children to stop communicating with someone who is sending insulting, hurtful or disturbing messages online. If the messages continue, ask your child to save them and then block that person. Then they need to tell a parent or trusted adult. Cyberbullying can have tragic outcomes for the bullied and serious legal consequences for the bully.

Think before you click. Children should never click links in messages from people they don't know or in messages that look suspicious. They should not download files to their phones or computers unless they are absolutely sure they're safe.

Be wary. Children should not get together with anyone they "meet" online. The person they think they're talking to online may not always be who they say they are. If a person asks for personal information or makes them uncomfortable, they need to come to you or another trusted adult.

Inform yourself. It can be difficult to keep up with technology, but just as you need to know where your children are in their offline lives, it is just as important to know where they go when they're online. Talk to other parents, learn from one another. As noted earlier, open communication with your children is your best route staying informed.

Randomly Check Your Child's Browser and Chat Histories. Don't be afraid to take a close look at what your children are looking at and who they're chatting with online. *Forewarned is forearmed.* Protectkids.com and Internet Safety 101 are excellent sources of information about sexual predators and advice to help avoid the dangers associated with online predators.

Check With Your ISP for Parental Control Software. Most Internet Service Providers offer free parental control software that can help parents keep their kids safe online. Some providers have it built into the modem/router used to access the service.

Set Parental Controls on the Connected Devices Your Kids Use. Windows and Mac computers, iOS and Android phones and tablets, and gaming consoles all offer parental controls. Familiarize yourself with these controls and adjust them as needed.

Check out these sites for the best apps to keep your entire family safe and responsible online. https://www.safewise.com/resources/parental-control-filters-buyers-guide/ and https://pixelprivacy.com/resources/keep-children-safe-online/ and https://www.pcmag.com/picks/the-best-parental-control-software

WARNING SIGNS

Kids who are being cyber-bullied, have been contacted by an online predator or viewing inappropriate material often exhibit changed behavior. They may act secretively, react unusually, close browser windows when you enter the room, take a device into the bathroom or other locked doors, spend excessive time online, especially at night, moodier than usual, and have mature knowledge about adult situations. Do not get angry at your child but talk to them in a non-judgmental manner.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- What are your favorite things to do online?
- What is personal information? Why should you keep it private?
- Tell me about a time that you were scared or worried about something you saw online.
- What could you do to be safer online?
- What would you do if anyone online asked to meet you face-to-face? Besides me, who do you feel that you can talk to if you are in a scary or uncomfortable situation?
  ("National Center for Missing and Exploited Children" website [www.netsmartz.org/internetsafety])

Parenting is hard! It takes a lot of time and energy to stay informed on keeping children safe online and in real time. Do not lose hope! With positive relationships, open communication and a healthy connection with your child, you will all survive and be stronger because of it!

More resources for parents:

Government of Canada: Get Cyber Safe, Canadian Centre for Child Protection, Need Help Now, www.kidshelpline.com, report concerns to https://www.cybertip.ca/app/en/report and/or the RCMP

Sources: CBC News, Scholastic , Privacy Canada, Pixel Privacy, Protect Young Minds, Canadian Pediatric Society

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She advocates for students and parents, providing a link to other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for over 20 years and is a mother to 4 teenagers.