

Smartphone Free Childhood

Connecting, empowering and uniting parents, educators and regulators to delay smartphones and social media, establish phone-free schools, and safeguard the use of technology in education.



A Parent's Guide: How to have online safety conversations

Establishing open communication with a teen about the digital world is less about locking doors and more about teaching them how to navigate the neighbourhood. To move away from the role of a police officer and toward the role of a guide, the conversation needs to shift from **control to collaboration**.

Here is a framework for establishing that ongoing dialogue and explaining your role in a way that resonates with a teenager.

Moving from Policing to Coaching

The biggest barrier to communication is the fear of being "punished" or having a device taken away. To lower their defences, try these shifts:

- **The "No-Trouble" Rule:** Explicitly tell them: *"If you see something scary, weird, or if you make a mistake, you can come to me, and you won't get in trouble. My goal is to help you fix it, not to take your phone."*
- **Show Genuine Interest:** Ask about what they love online – their favourite creators, games, or memes. If they feel you value their digital joy, they are more likely to trust you with their digital worries.
- **Casual Over Formal:** Avoid The Big Talk. Rather aim for The Little Talks – frequent, brief, 2-minute check-ins while driving, making dinner or doing dishes. It makes the topic feel like a normal part of life rather than an interrogation.

Explaining Your Role

When they push back on supervision, you can use these analogies to explain why your "job" includes their online world:

The Driver's Ed Approach:

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"I'm not watching you because I don't trust you; I'm watching because the internet is like a highway. You're a great driver, but there are other people on the road who aren't, and there are hazards you haven't encountered yet. My job is to be the person in the passenger seat helping you spot the pothole before you hit it."



The Holistic Health Approach:

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"As your parent, I'm responsible for your health. That means I care about what you eat, how much sleep you get, and what you're exposed to. The online world is just another environment (like school or a party), where I need to make sure you're safe and healthy."



Approaching the Conversation

Instead of lecturing, ask **curiosity-based questions** to help them develop critical thinking and encourage them to internalise these values rather than just following rules to avoid getting in trouble. Here are some examples:

Topic	Instead of saying...	Try asking...
Privacy	"Don't post personal stuff!"	"How do you think companies or strangers might use the info you share?"
Screen Time	"You've been on that phone for hours, get off now!"	"I notice your energy changes after being on [App]. How does your body/brain feel right now compared to when we were outside?"
Algorithms	"That App is brainwashing you with weird videos."	"Why do you think the App showed you that specific video next? What is it trying to get you to do or feel?"
Distraction	"Put your phone away while you're doing homework!"	"Do you feel like you can focus better when your phone is in another room? Let's experiment."
Cyberbullying	"Don't post anything you'll regret later."	"Have you ever seen someone get 'piled on' in a comment section? How did that look to you?"
Stanger danger	"Don't talk to people you don't know online."	"If someone you met online asks for a private chat, why do you think they want to move away from the public lobby?"
Content	"That site is inappropriate."	"Does scrolling through [App Name] ever make you feel annoyed or bad about yourself? Why do you think that is?"



Maintaining Oversight Without Spying

Transparency is the key to maintaining trust. If you install parental controls or monitoring software (which we highly recommend!), be honest and open about it and use them as conversation starters.

- **Set Shared Boundaries:** Use a Family Digital Pledge where both you and the teen agree on rules (e.g. no phones at dinner – for parents too!).
 - Download the [**Our Families Tech Rules**](#) resource
- **The "Open Door" Policy:** Agree that you won't read their private texts for fun, but that you have the "right of way" to check if you have a specific safety concern.
- **Collaborative Safety:** Sit down together once a month to review privacy settings on their favourite apps. Let them show you how to block and report people.

Teen Conversation Starters

The most effective way to involve your teen and gain their buy-in is to create open, non-judgemental conversations where ideas can be shared freely.

Thoughtful questions, introduced naturally during everyday moments, can encourage engagement and spark critical thinking. These conversations don't need to be intense or lengthy, the goal is to plant ideas your teen can reflect on long after the discussion has ended.

Here are some ideas:

- If you saw a friend being treated poorly in a group chat, do you think it's better to address it there and then, in the group or message them privately?
- Which app do you think is the most 'toxic' right now, and which one is better and more fun?
- I heard about [specific online trend/news]—is that something people are talking about at school? What are your thoughts about this?
- If you accidentally clicked on something or got a weird message, would you feel comfortable telling me even if you thought you'd get in trouble? Why do you think I might get upset and how would you suggest I handle that better?
- Do you ever feel like you have to post a certain way to keep up an image, or are you less worried about that? Where do you feel online pressure most?