Preparing for the DigiTalk with your teen

Does it feel like the most meaningful conversation you've had with your teenager recently is about what you're having for dinner? Getting teenagers to talk about anything can often seem like a struggle, let alone when the conversation is about something serious, scary or embarrassing.

You're not alone but know it's always worth persevering to help your child thrive both online and offline. To ensure that you're equipped to have the DigiTalk with your teen, we've put together a guide that covers everything you need to consider before you dive right in.

A conversation isn't a lecture

If you haven't had a chat with your child about their online world before, build up to it by first letting them know you're interested in what they're doing. Jumping straight to concerns is likely to shut down any conversation.

Try first asking them to show you what they are up to. Start with some questions like "Can you show me what you'd do if you needed to block someone on that site or app?" This could lead into a discussion about whether they have ever had to do that, or what sort of behaviours would lead them to take that action.

Be prepared

If your teenager does open up to you, it can help to have some knowledge up your sleeve.

Firstly, know a bit about the current sites or apps they're using. Common Sense Media is a great resource that features reviews on popular movies, games, shows, social apps and podcasts. This site identifies the key themes of the content your child is interested in and can empower you to decide if it is appropriate for their age group. Our Gamers Guide also features some great practical advice about appropriate terms and words to use.

You don't need to be an expert, but using the wrong terms could backfire because your teenager might think you really have no idea what's going on.

The eSafety Guide is a great place to find out the process of blocking and reporting content for different apps. It also provides steps to follow if something concerning arises, such as image-based abuse.

Pick your moment and style

Having a serious conversation can be hard for anyone if it isn't the right time. It can be less intimidating if it's while you're doing something else – maybe in the car or walking the dog together.

You could also consider starting the conversation via text or messenger, where it can be easier to express things than face to face. If the conversation isn't going anywhere, or if they ask you to leave it for now, it's OK to come back

to it at another time. However, if someone is at immediate risk, explain why you need to follow up right away.

What should we talk about?

It's good to have conversations before things go wrong, but it's extra important if you have any concerns about something going on.

Friendships play a big part in life offline and online and can be a source of joy but also anxiety for teenagers. Look out for changes in mood or not wanting to engage with the same people.

Conversations that start with "I've noticed…" can let your teen know you aren't jumping right to blame or making false assumptions. It can also be useful to start the conversation by talking generally – try things like "I've been hearing a lot about online bullying through chat groups. Is there anything like that going on at your school?"

Talking about what is – and what isn't – appropriate content is also important. Set expectations with your teenager that it's not ok to share anything that is harmful or dangerous to themselves or others. It can be an interesting activity to search for your name with them and see what comes up and then discuss if this is something the world should have access to. Talk about the potential risks of identifiable images reaching the hands of someone without great intentions.

Thinking critically

The old adage, 'if something is too good to be true…' applies to the online world too. With scams becoming increasingly sophisticated, it's worth ensuring you are talking through how to avoid falling for something when the consequences could range from embarrassment to losing money.

Don't be afraid to use examples from your own life or the news to start these conversations. It's also not always about losing something – thinking critically about the reliability of news that you read and share is a skill that also needs practice.

Ask things like "Where do you go to find information? How do you know you can trust it?"

If they can't tell you, then it's a great opportunity to investigate together!

Leaving a positive mark

Reputation can be hard to shake if there is evidence of certain things that have been said or done. Talk about the chances to leave a good mark on the online world, rather than a negative one.

Ask your teen if they have any strategies they use to stop and think before they post something – either publicly or just in their circle of friends. And if they don't, it's an opportunity to talk about it and then create it together.

Key takeaways:

1. Approach conversations about the online world as an opportunity for dialogue rather than a lecture, showing genuine interest in your teen's activities and asking open-ended questions.

2. Equip yourself with knowledge about the platforms your teenager is using and familiarize yourself with resources for handling online issues, such as blocking and reporting content.

3. Choose the right timing and communication style for serious discussions, consider alternative settings or start the conversation through text or messages.

4. Address topics such as friendships, appropriate content sharing, critical thinking, and digital reputation to prevent issues and create awareness.

5. Encourage critical thinking skills, discuss the risks of scams and unreliable information, and promote strategies for thoughtful online posting to leave a positive digital footprint.
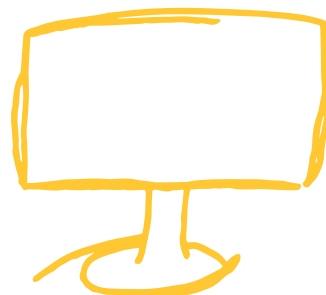
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You may discover during your conversations with your teen a set of popular apps they regularly use, such as social media. But those aren't all of them. the internet is a largely unregulated place and you may be surprised about the kinds of apps and websites they frequent. Be sure to gently explore the sites they may use you would have never heard of and ask about the sorts of content they see when using them.

As an indicator, chat apps that connect users to random strangers remain common. Some of these may have 18+ warnings that can be validated with a single tap leading them into a world where some rather intensely unsavoury experiences can be had. Teens may accept these as par for the course in using the apps which otherwise they may find fun and chaotic.

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