A PARENT'S GUIDE TO DIGITAL SAFETY

HELPING KIDS NAVIGATE ONLINE RISKS AND BUILD HEALTHY HABITS

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

This guidebook is written specifically for parents of teens and preteens who are using, or considering using, social media platforms and other online technologies. These include popular apps like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and even AI chatbots. It organizes the potential online risks and harms into eight main categories, which are listed on the following pages. Each section outlines one potential risk or harm. These groupings reflect issues parents and caregivers most often worry about when it comes to their child's online experiences.

For each type of risk or harm, we outline:

What it means

An explanation of the issue and ways children and teens might encounter it.

How common it is

Information to help gauge how often young people encounter the risk or harm.

For each category of harms, the guidebook provides practical information on strategies to prevent or manage the risks and harms.

What you and your kids can do

Actionable steps to prevent the harms, reduce their impact, or manage them if they're already occurring.

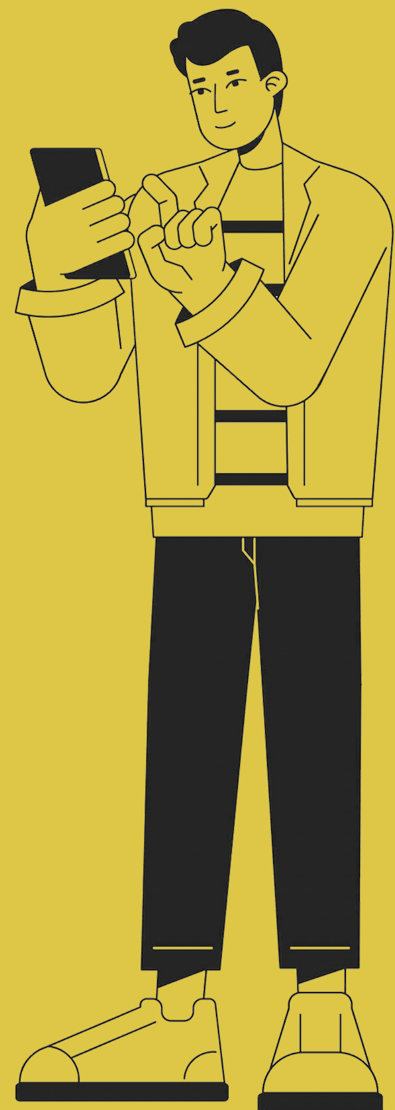
Where to find resources and help

Trusted organizations, hotlines, tools, and professional support options.

Making this guidebook work for you:

- If you are experiencing an urgent issue, please use the **emergency resource guide on the last few pages of the guidebook** instead of reading through the whole guidebook.
- If you are more concerned about a specific topic or issues (e.g., cyberbullying, body image, or exposure to explicit content), feel free to use the table of contents to skip ahead and focus on the sections you are most interested in.
- Last but not least, to understand the full picture, consider starting with the introduction section, which is meant to orient you to challenges young people face, and offers a framework parents can use to help alleviate them. Afterward, move on to the individual risks and harms.
- As your kids, your practices as a family, and technology platforms change, some sections of this guide may become more relevant than others. Have a look from time to time to see which might be most useful to you.

The goal is flexibility: Tailor your reading to your family's needs while building awareness and confidence. Combining open, ongoing conversations with evidence-based strategies remains one of the most effective ways to promote safer, healthier technology use. In the spirit of flexibility, while this guidebook is designed for teens and preteens, many of the tips and resources are applicable to younger children and young adults as well.



Each family is unique. Some include biological, adoptive or step-parents, while others are led by single or divorced parents. In some homes, extended family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, live together under one roof. No matter who's in charge, raising kids is a full-time job. Parents (used in this guidebook to refer to anyone who is a primary caregiver of a child) do this critical work every day. And many juggle it all while working to support their families.

QUICK ACTION GUIDE: WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHAT TO DO

Before diving into the details, here is a quick summary of the immediate steps you can take to promote healthy and safe online interactions and identify, prevent, and manage online risks and harms.

Your First 3 Proactive Steps:

1. **Using "CALMER"**: Approach digital habits with curiosity: **C**ommunicate, **A**ssess & **A**ddress, **L**isten & **L**earn, **M**onitor & **M**anage, **E**ducate & **E**ncourage, and **R**eport & Use **R**esources. Let kids know they can come to you without fear of punishment.

C

Communicate: Talk openly with your child about their digital and real-world lives with curiosity instead of judgment.

A

Assess and Address: Evaluate how much your child is exposed to specific online harms and take collaborative steps to fix any negative impacts.

L

Listen and Learn: Genuinely hear what your child has to say about their favorite platforms and let them show you how they navigate their online world.

M

Monitor and Manage: Stay aware of the apps and online spaces your child uses and work together to create healthy, realistic boundaries for screen time and content.

E

Educate and Encourage: Wherever possible, educate yourself about how technologies work so you can support your child to be a savvy consumer of online media. Encourage prosocial, healthy activities and offline experiences.

R

Report and Use Resources: Know when to flag harmful content to platforms, report illegal activities to authorities, or seek professional support for more serious issues.

2. **Decide on and Set Up Safeguards as a Family:** Turn on built-in screen time limits and content restrictions (Apple Families, Google Family Link) or use comprehensive apps like Qustodio or Net Nanny. Disable "In-App Purchases" in your device settings. Revisit and adjust these settings as needed from time to time. Certain parental control apps can be quite invasive and restrictive, so it is important to talk with your child about what you think is appropriate in order to maintain trust and open communication.

3. **Save Emergency Contacts:** Add the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (**988**) and the Crisis Text Line (Text **HOME** to **741741**) to your phone and your child's device right now. For extra visibility, also post the numbers in a common area of your home, such as on the fridge or family calendar. This way, help is always easy to find, even when phones aren't nearby.

A Note on Encountering Online Harms

At some point, most children and teens will encounter something online that makes them feel uncomfortable or upset, much like they do in everyday real-life interactions. The online world mirrors the offline one in its mix of positive and challenging experiences. Recent data shows that nearly half of teens (around 45%) state that they spend too much time on social media, and many encounter harmful content on these platforms. Common issues, such as seeing mean comments, feeling pressure to compare oneself to others, or spending more time scrolling than intended, are relatively widespread.

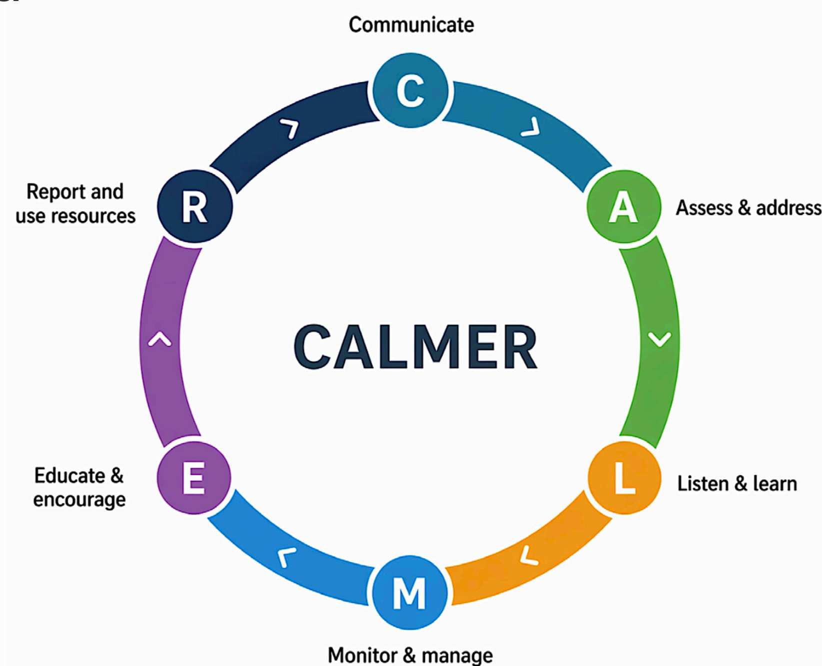
These discomforts are common, and it is essential that parents and communities work to mitigate them. There are also more severe and damaging harms, such as sustained cyberbullying, image-based sexual abuse, and exposure to extreme content encouraging self-harm. These are rarer, serious incidents, and though less frequent, they can have profound and lasting impacts on victims' mental health, safety, and well-being. They should never be tolerated in any space, online or offline.

As you explore the different types of risks and harms listed in this guidebook, remember that most online experiences can be managed with support, guidelines, and conversation while also staying alert to the rarer but more serious risks.

A CALMER WAY TO PROTECT TEENS ONLINE

In this guidebook, we introduce a simple response framework designed to equip you with essential strategies for addressing various online harms effectively: **Communicate, Assess & Address, Listen & Learn, Monitor & Manage, Educate & Encourage, Report and Use Resources**.

The main goal of CALMER is to empower parents and caregivers with the knowledge and resources they need to help young people thrive online and support them in developing healthy digital habits.



C **Communicate** with curiosity and care. Keep channels of communication open about life online and offline. Approach with curiosity rather than judgment.

A **Assess** your child's risk level: whether and how much your child is being exposed to a specific harm, and if that exposure has manifested as negative outcomes.

Address negative effects they experience by taking steps together to prevent or reduce further exposure, and to remedy any problems your child is experiencing as a result of that exposure.

L **Listen and Learn** from your child about their life online, including the particular websites and social media platforms or apps they use, what they see as the pros and cons of using them, and what they think, feel, and do about potential harms. If you haven't seen

the websites or platforms, take a few minutes to check them out. You may invite your child to share what excites them about a specific tool or feature. A quick 5-to-10-minute walkthrough can reveal a lot without requiring you to become an expert overnight.

M

Monitor the social media platforms and other apps and tools your child uses. This means being aware of how your child is using these platforms. Check in regularly, both online and with your child, about any platforms that raise concerns for you or for them. Content, images, and ads evolve fast. Usage patterns also change over time and in different circumstances as kids grow. Make a concrete plan together for managing exposure that causes concern, stress, or distress for your child. This can take many forms, like a monthly check-in or a family media "contract." Check in regularly about how the plan is working and adjust it together as needed. Monitoring isn't "observation" or "surveillance" of your child's online activity without their awareness or consent. Doing so can backfire and erode trust, even in strong relationships.

Manage exposure to the harms your child encounters online and the ways these harms may be affecting everyday life at home, with peers, in school, or in the community. Even as adolescents naturally seek more autonomy and independent activities away from home, staying connected in simple, caring ways still matters. This might look like checking in casually about who they're hanging out with, where they're headed, or how things are going with friends, all while showing genuine interest rather than suspicion. These check-ins support overall positive adjustment and well-being in teens.

E

Educate yourself on how online spaces work so you and your child can recognize both their benefits for learning and connection, and their specific risks and harms. If you don't know what something means or how it works, search online and explore digital parenting tips and resources.

Encourage your child to use their own powers of detection and selection as consumers of digital media, and support their engagement in healthy, prosocial activities with people offline.

R

Report and Use Resources: Some harms are serious – even illegal – and should be reported to authorities immediately, while others should be reported to the companies that own and operate platforms themselves. Less serious harms can often be addressed by parents and teens working together to build, support, and reinforce safe and healthy online habits that fit within everyday life at home, at school, and in the community. Some harms affect teens' mental or physical health so seriously that they can be life-threatening or significantly interfere with daily functioning. In these cases, resources and support beyond the family – including professional help from a mental health care provider – may be necessary.

SECTION 1: TIME & ATTENTION RISK AND HARMS

1.1 – Excessive Use, Loss of Control, and Problematic Use

WHAT IT MEANS

Sometimes young people spend so much time online that it starts to affect their everyday life. This isn't just regular scrolling. Excessive use means a person loses control and can't stop, even when they realize it is interfering with day-to-day life. If your child says, even casually, "I think I spend too much time online," that's a sign to pay attention.

It's important to remind ourselves and our children that time online can be a positive, socially connecting, and uplifting experience, but it requires control and balance. The Department of Health and Human Services found that teenagers using social media more than 3 hours a day had double the risks of negative mental health outcomes. The risk of other harms discussed in this guidebook can be increased or worsened by excessive use of online technologies.

HOW COMMON IT IS

A 2025 report from Pew Research Center found that 45% of teens aged 13–17 say they spend too much time on social media. Some social media use is okay and even helpful, but too much can lead to problems like stress, poor sleep, or feeling disconnected from real life. According to Addiction Help, around 8.5% of young people under 18 may be addicted to gaming, with the symptoms being more prevalent among boys.

1.2 – Displacement: When Time Online Crowds Out Sleep, Exercise, and Real-Life Connection

WHAT IT MEANS

Spending too much time online can often push out other critical aspects of healthy adolescent development, like getting enough restorative sleep, physical activity, or hanging out with friends in person. This is called *displacement*, and it happens when time online takes over time that could be spent doing healthy or prosocial things offline.

Displacement can come in many forms, and isn't limited to scrolling on social media. The disruptive nature of phone notifications can often distract people participating in offline activities as well.

HOW COMMON IT IS

A report from 2024 found that 43% of teens aged 14–17 said social media takes time away from things they care about, like friends, working out, or other offline interests. A 2025 report found that teens say social media platforms hurt the amount of sleep they get (45%), as well as their productivity (40%).

1.3 – Parental Screen Time

WHAT IT MEANS

It's not just kids; parents can also spend too much time on screens and devices. When this happens, it detracts from time spent talking, playing, or connecting with their children. Research shows that when parents are glued to their screens or constantly checking their phones, kids feel frustrated and ignored.

It's also important to note that parents' screen time habits help model what is and is not okay for children. One study found that more screen use by parents as well as screen use at mealtimes are associated with higher levels of screen time for children. Modeling the screen use that you'd like your child to adhere to is important in setting expectations.

HOW COMMON IT IS

A report found that 47% of American parents feel that they spend too much time on their phones, and 46% of teens say their parents are sometimes distracted by their phones while they are trying to talk to them.

1.4 – CALMER Strategies to Prevent and Manage Time & Attention Risks and Harms

Talk with your child about making choices and being in control of their time online. If they are struggling with screen time, gently remind them of the things they may be missing in their offline lives. Be sympathetic, as regaining control of screen habits can be hard – and it's important for children to feel like they have command of their own time. Suggest doing a screen-free activity together: Play a board game, take a walk, try a craft, or enjoy family reading time. For more ideas, check out the California Partners Project's family guide to help kids move more and scroll less.

Learn with your child about how to use phones mindfully: Pick it up on purpose, not just out of habit. Before reaching for your phone, pause and ask aloud: "Why am I checking my phone right now?" or "Can it wait?" Keep a list of mindful questions like these on the fridge where the whole family can see them. You can also reduce the urge to pick up your phone by turning off notifications for particularly distracting apps. This is something parents and kids can do together. Lastly, acknowledging that parents also struggle with these issues can help.

Talk to your child about unfollowing, blocking, or muting accounts. It can sometimes slip our minds that if we are having an unpleasant experience online, we can take steps to make sure it happens less often. Many platforms have options to select "Show me less posts like this," and you can always unfollow, block, or mute accounts that post distracting or upsetting content.

Spend time outdoors together, in whatever way is possible for your family. Depending on where you live, outdoor time may look different from family to family. But research shows being in nature supports the health and well being of children and adolescents. Going on neighborhood walks, playing sports at a park, or taking family hikes can help children stay active.

Set limits for screen time and stick to them. Nearly all devices, including Apple and Android devices, have screen time features that allow parents to set time limits on particular apps. These features can also help young people create their own boundaries. You and your kids can turn off non-essential notifications, or simply enable "Do Not Disturb," to support focus without constant interruptions. Some parents find that these built-in apps are too easily bypassed. If that's the case for your family, there are more restrictive apps that control screen time like Opal or Brick, which block apps completely for a set amount of time. It can also be helpful to check the built-in screen time report on Apple or Google devices, so you can reflect on which apps you are using and for how long, and whether you want to change this habit.

A Note on Using Technology to Support Safety: It Is Not Enough

This guidebook recommends specific parental controls, content filters, parenting resources, and reporting mechanisms to help families support online safety. It is important to understand that **no technology is foolproof**. Apps are updated constantly, workarounds are easily found, and harmful content still slips through. These tools can provide a false sense of security and should never be used as a "set-it-and-forget-it" solution. **Your active, ongoing involvement, open communication, and trusting relationship with your child is essential to their safety online.**

Turn off bright colors or block certain apps before bed or during school. According to the National Sleep Foundation, bright lights can disrupt our circadian rhythm and suppress melatonin release, which is the primary hormone that regulates sleep. Some youth delete the apps from their phone during the school week (Monday to Friday), and only redownload them on weekends. This helps them to better pay attention in class, get more restful sleep, and accomplish more with their school work and after school activities. Other young people delete apps in the weeks leading up to big tests or finals. It helps them study better and feel less worried or distracted. Apps like ClearSpace can help young people make their phone less appealing to support healthy habits.

Model healthy tech habits by showing your child how to balance tech use with real-life connection. Put your phone away during conversations with your kids and others.

Create tech-free zones and times in your home. Common spaces like the living room can be helpful for keeping everyone in the family accountable when it comes to phone use. You can also designate certain device-free times, like family meals or movie nights.

Conversation Starters

Do you ever feel like social media and screens are taking time away from other things in your life?

I want to help you use your phone in a way that feels safe and healthy. What can I do to help you with that?

I've noticed you're spending a lot of time on your phone recently. I know it can be really hard to put down sometimes, but I'm here to help. What can I do?

WHAT TO DO IF YOU NEED EXTERNAL HELP

- If your child is really struggling to cut back on their screen time, consider talking to a therapist or school counselor who understands tech overuse. Contact a mental health expert like those at Child Mind Institute, or use the Crisis Text Line (Text **HOME** to **741741**).
- If your child is avoiding offline life completely, consider reaching out to experts like those at Net Addiction Recovery for support.
- For queer youth struggling with excessive use, The Trevor Project has specific resources, as well as a 24/7 help line.

TO LEARN MORE

- Comprehensive resources from Bend Health and reSTART
- The American Academy of Pediatrics's "5 Cs" method

SECTION 2: CYBERBULLYING, ONLINE HARASSMENT, AND DOXXING

2.1 – Cyberbullying, Online Harassment, and Doxxing

WHAT IT MEANS

Young people may encounter mean comments or bullying online, which can be hard to escape and can cause real emotional harm. Cyberbullying poses many of the same risks as traditional bullying, and there's more risk when youth experience both. However, because cyberbullying happens online, victims often experience bullying around the clock. Additionally, youth who are cyberbullied are significantly more likely to cyberbully others.

People may use phones, social media, or online games to be cruel or hurtful. This includes things like:

- Sending mean messages or texts
- Posting cruel comments
- Sharing embarrassing pictures or videos without consent
- Spreading rumors
- Excluding someone on purpose
- Making fake accounts to harass or upset others

"Doxxing" is a serious type of online harassment that can often cross into real life. Doxxing occurs when someone posts another person's private information – like their full name, home address, or phone number – on the internet to scare or hurt them.

HOW COMMON IT IS

- A UN report found that 1 in 5 children say they have been cyberbullied. In some countries, the number of children affected has jumped by 50% or more in just a few years
- The CDC found that in 2023, the prevalence of cyberbullying for high schoolers in the U.S. was about 16%, and was more likely to happen to girls and those who identified as LGBTQ+.
- According to a survey by Thorn, 41% of 9–17-year-olds report being bullied on an online platform before.
- Ofcom of the UK reported that around 7% of children aged 13–17 had seen or experienced

persistent online bullying in the past four weeks.

- National surveys conducted by Pew Research in the U.S. and Ofcom in the UK show that bullying dominantly happens on whichever platform is popular at the time. Right now, that's Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok. On these three platforms, the three most common cyberbullying methods were being called offensive names, having rumors spread about oneself, and being physically threatened. 27% of children reported experiencing at least one of these three methods on Snapchat, with Instagram sitting at 19%, and TikTok at 18%. 75% of the kids surveyed said that cyberbullying was a problem for people their age on these platforms.
- Teachers also see this as a problem in their classrooms. A report from RAND shows that teachers consistently ranked cyberbullying and traditional bullying as their top concerns in the classroom.

2.2 – CALMER Strategies to Prevent and Manage Cyberbullying, Online Harassment, and Doxxing

- **Talk regularly with your child** about what they're seeing online and how it makes them feel. Talk about online safety the same way you talk about other family rules.
- **Use parental controls** to help monitor, filter, or block harmful content. Paid apps like Net Nanny or Qustodio are helpful for customizing content controls and what you allow your child to access. Apple Families and Google Family Link are free options for parents as well.
- **Go through settings together** on phones and apps. Turn on two-factor authentication (extra security!).
- **Take a look at this guide** that the University of Maryland put together that includes steps you can take to prevent doxxing:
    - Make your accounts private.
    - Turn off or limit location sharing.
    - Use strong passwords.
    - Keep personal identifying information, like your address and school, off the internet.

WHAT TO DO IF SOMETHING BAD HAPPENS

- **Use the "Report" button** on the app to flag harmful posts or accounts.
- **Block the person doing it** and remove them from friends lists. Here are some resources on how to report and block people on popular social media sites: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube.
- **Encourage kids to open up about harmful experiences online**, and reassure them that telling a trusted adult or teacher is better than keeping it to themselves.
- **Report the bully when it's a known person.** Online bullying is often perpetrated by people that the child may know in person, and may be accompanied by in person bullying. In these cases, it can be important to report it to the school or another trusted organization so they can help intervene and prevent further incidents.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU NEED ADDITIONAL HELP

National organizations for collective support:

- Cyberbullying Research Center - a collection of information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying.
- Love is Respect, National Teen Dating Violence Helpline: Text **LOVEIS** to **22522**
- Teenline - Support from other teenage volunteers, "listeners"
- Runaway - Youth crisis support and connection
- Trans Lifeline - For transgender youth and adults
- Blackline - Support that prioritizes BIPOC through an LGBTQ+ Black femme lens
- For queer youth, The Trevor Project has resources and a 24/7 help line

Conversation Starters

Have you or any of your friends dealt with a cyberbully? What happened?

What do you know about cyberbullying? I want to set up a plan about how you can deal with it, or help your friends deal with it.

Do you know if your school has policies around cyberbullying? Are they the same or different from in-person bullying?

WHERE TO GET HELP IMMEDIATELY

- Call **988** to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and talk to trained counselors.
- Text **HOME** to **741741** to chat with a crisis counselor (Crisis Text Line).

SECTION 3: EMOTIONAL RISKS AND HARMS

3.1 – Negative Emotion and Well-Being

WHAT IT MEANS

Sometimes people who view others online feel inferior in some way. This is called *upward social comparison*; it's when you think someone else's life looks better than yours. Social media makes this worse because people usually only post the best parts of their lives, like vacations, parties, or achievements, so it can seem like everyone else is doing great all the time.

In 2022, a paper that combined data from many studies found that greater social media use was linked to a small but noticeable increase in depression among adolescents.

Seeing harmful content, upsetting news, or negative encounters can take a toll on how kids feel emotionally. Frequent exposure to negative content or interactions can build up over time, creating significant challenges for young people.

Here is a breakdown of the main ways these psychological effects show up:

- When young people feel sad or lonely, they may turn to the internet for comfort or distraction. While this can be uplifting with appropriate use, excessive time spent online can exacerbate the feelings.
- When young people watch distressing content online, such as videos depicting conflict, school shootings, wildfires, or war, they are more likely to feel anxious or sad.

HOW COMMON IT IS

A 2025 Pew report found that 34% of teenage girls and 20% of teenage boys aged 13–17 said that social media platforms made them feel worse about their own lives. That's a lot of pressure, and it can lead to lower self-worth and feeling lonely, left out, or unhappy.

3.2 – Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

WHAT IT MEANS

FOMO means “fear of missing out.” It’s that worried feeling when you think everyone else is having fun, going to cool places, or doing exciting things . . . and you are not part of it. For young people, this feeling is much stronger, because it comes at a time when they are still trying to find their identity. Social media can exacerbate the feeling of FOMO. Why? Because online life is usually a highlight reel: fun trips, parties, hangouts, new clothes, or big wins. Most people don’t post the boring or hard days: doing homework, feeling tired, sad, or lonely. So when your child scrolls and sees friends at a movie, a sleepover, or on vacation without them, it can hurt. They might think: “Why wasn’t I invited?” or “My life isn’t as fun or exciting.”

HOW COMMON IT IS

Although there is no clinical definition of FOMO, and its severity can range heavily, research with Flemish adolescents has shown that FOMO is commonly linked to increased social media use, even during real-life conversations and social interactions. According to one study, around 46% of teenagers struggle with moderate or severe FOMO, which is positively associated with the intensity in which they use social media sites.

3.3- CALMER Strategies to Prevent or Mitigate Emotional Risks and Harms

Ask your child how they're feeling and encourage open conversations. Let them know it's okay to feel upset sometimes. If the upset continues for long periods of time, it can be helpful to bring up the option of therapy, and especially emphasize that it is not a sign of them being "messed up." Avoiding stigmatization is very important around mental health treatments.

Conversation Starters

I've noticed that you've been a little low energy and not hanging out with your friends as much recently, want to talk?

Hey, how have you been feeling about school and your relationships recently?

Why don't you take time this week and do something fun as a family or with your friends?

Set limits. Encourage your child to mute, unfollow, or block accounts that make them feel bad. Young people often forget they have agency to curate certain aspects of their social feeds.

Use parental controls to help monitor, filter, or block harmful content. Paid apps like Net Nanny or Qustodio are helpful for customizing content controls and what you allow your child to access. Google's Family Link and Apple's Screen Time are great free options for parents as well.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU NEED EXTERNAL HELP

It can sometimes be difficult to tell if your child is experiencing severe emotional harms, but here are some things to look out for:

- A sudden drop in academic performance
- Loss of interest in activities your child once enjoyed
- No longer spending time with friends
- Significant changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Frequent complaints of headaches and/or body aches

If one or more of these warning signs are present, consider talking to a mental health professional. Alternatively, reach out to organizations that specialize in digital wellness and youth mental health, such as:

- The Crisis Textline's website, which has resources for depression, anxiety, and loneliness
- Child Mind Institute
- The Trevor Project
- Project Healthy Minds
- Mental Health America

TO LEARN MORE

- If you are unsure about the signs of depression or what do about them, check out this resource guide from behavioral health specialists.
- If you want to dive deeper, consider reading the California Partners' Social-Emotional Health Family Guide
- If you're looking for resources that are tailored more towards young boys in general, we recommend The American Institute for Boys and Men.

SECTION 4: PHYSICAL HEALTH HARMS

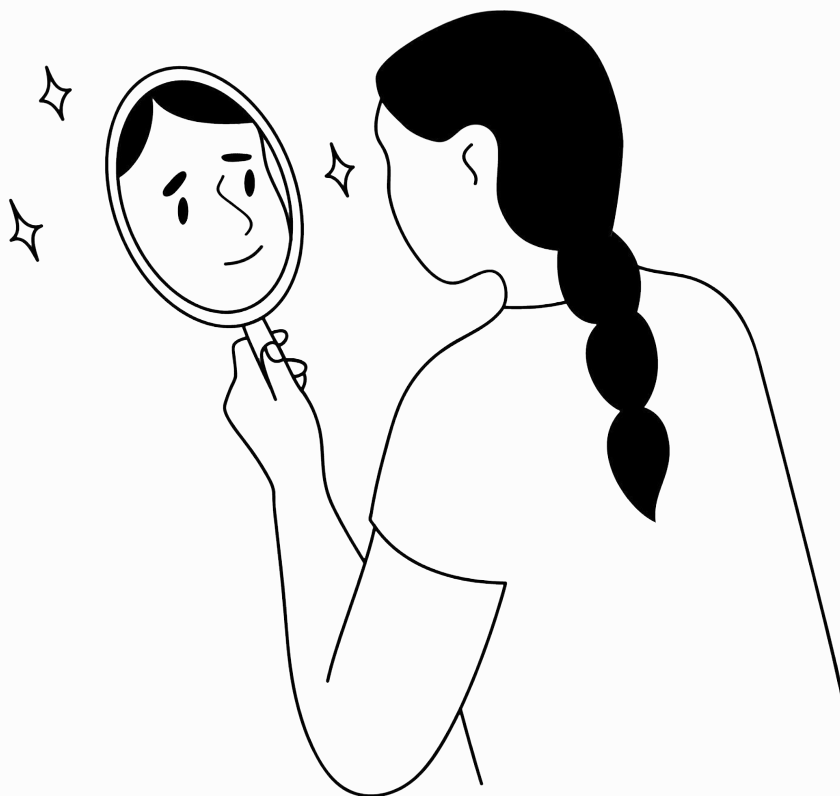
4.1 – Body Image

WHAT IT MEANS

Some posts and groups online talk about eating and exercise in very unsafe ways. Paid influencers and even everyday people may heavily edit their photos, creating unrealistic beauty standards. This type of content might be explicitly promoting these habits or doing it more subtly, but either way, it can lead young people to compare themselves unfavorably to the bodies they see online. Unrealistic images shared online might push young people to:

- Eat less than is recommended by health professionals
- Make themselves throw up after eating (purging)
- Work out way too much or too hard
- Aspire to be extremely thin or overly muscular
- Hyperfixate on makeup and beauty products
- Use steroids or steroid-like drugs
- Apply beauty filters or aggressive editing to the photos they post online

These posts often share “tips” on how to do these harmful things or hide potentially harmful behaviors from parents, such as, “How to hide food or throw it away without your family noticing,” “Ways to purge quietly after dinner,” or “Secret workouts you can do in your room at night.”



While filters disappear when someone locks their phone, influencers can also undergo cosmetic procedures such as filler and Botox, distorting the audience's view of a "normal" appearance. A study found that young women who follow influencers who are open about their cosmetic procedures are more likely to consider getting this type of work done. Another study also found that young women who had undergone cosmetic surgery cited social media filter use as a motivator for getting a procedure. Some influencers post about undergoing cosmetic procedures. Others brand themselves as skincare influencers. These influencers may encourage other young girls to buy products they don't need, or encourage an obsession with achieving "flawless" skin.

Harmful body image content is extra tricky because it is often pitched as "wellness." It might look like helpful advice about how to be healthy, eat "clean," stay fit, or practice self-care. But the reality is that it can encourage dangerous habits that lead to serious problems.

Algorithm-driven apps can exacerbate issues. When a young person watches or "likes" a video about diets, workouts, or thin bodies, an app or platform often shows more and more of the same type of content, inserting related-content that is even more risky. A user's feed can quickly become filled with harmful ideas without them even searching for it.

This presents real challenges for young people of all genders. We may often think this kind of content is targeted toward young women, but this is also a problem that affects young men. It just presents differently.

Some young people become interested in using steroids and steroid-like drugs (SLDs) because they want to look super muscular, strong, and lean, like bodybuilders, MMA fighters, or popular influencers. Young men pursuing a masculine ideal are particularly vulnerable to this kind of content. Algorithms curate and amplify body ideals that are generally unattainable through sustainable eating and fitness habits.

As a parent, it is important to understand that three classes of steroid-like drugs are currently being promoted on social media platforms: anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS), peptides, and selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs). In the U.S., AAS are illegal for sale without a prescription; peptides and SARMs are illegal to sell as unapproved drugs for major consumption.

An article from CBS News points out that some young people, especially boys, may be driven by social media influencers to use steroids or other performance-enhancing drugs for looks-based reasons. However, extremely potent synthetic anabolic steroids like Trenbolone are not meant for human use as a growth hormone; they can severely damage the liver, kidneys, and heart.

HOW COMMON IT IS

An experiment found that young people who cut their time on social media by 50% over a three-week period felt better about how they look. Meta's own research showed that about 1 in 3 teen girls said Instagram made them feel worse about their bodies, especially if they already felt insecure.

Common Sense Media found that 91% of boys had been exposed to body image or appearance content online, and 75% were exposed to content about being muscular. Additionally, about 1 in 4 boys said that social media makes them feel pressure to change the way they look.

4.2 – Content Promoting Use of Substances that Harm Health

WHAT IT MEANS

Tobacco in any form (cigarettes, vaping, nicotine pouches, etc.,), alcohol, drugs, and steroids are all substances that can harm physical and mental health. Content that positively portrays nicotine or tobacco products frequently appears on social media, both in company advertising and in posts shared by people who use these products. Research shows that the more teens use social media in their daily lives, the more they are exposed to content promoting tobacco or nicotine use. This exposure makes them more likely to have positive attitudes about using, to believe there isn't much harm to using, and start using.

Nicotine and tobacco products aren't the only substances showing up on social media. Content that shows people using drugs and that casts drug use in a positive light is prevalent as well. Even though cannabis is legal for adults in many places, it's still illegal for anyone under 21, and definitely not safe or okay for young people. According to research, when drug use is portrayed favorably on social media or elsewhere, teens are more likely to develop accepting attitudes toward using drugs and to downplay the risks.

In specific cases, social media can be used as a vehicle to sell drugs, particularly platforms that have disappearing messaging features, like Snapchat and Instagram. For more information on social media drug dealing, the DEA has a brief guide on understanding how this occurs. Encrypted messaging platforms have also enabled selling drugs online. Platforms like Telegram support end-to-end encryption, offering anonymity to communities that sell and buy drugs and thus making them harder to trace.

HOW COMMON IT IS

- More than 75% of middle and high school students who use social media report seeing marketing or advertising of nicotine or tobacco products, including e-cigarettes.
- Social media has a lot of content about e-cigarette use posted by users, and these posts often show trendy designs and flavors, making use seem like a prosocial behavior. One study

found about 98% of vaping content is positive, meaning that the posts were almost always glamorizing vaping, making it feel desirable to young people.

- According to a study about buying drugs on social media or messaging applications, of 358 adult drug users, around 80% had used apps such as Snapchat, Instagram, or WhatsApp to access drugs. About 79% of the sample reported that they used these apps for convenient transactions, while roughly 59% reported that the apps facilitated quick drug purchasing.
- In 2022, a review of studies of substance-related posts on social media platforms found that over 76% of substance-related content was positive, while only about 20% was negative.
- A different study found that 60% of kids aged 13–18 said they'd seen drugs on their social media feeds, and of those kids, 29% said the content explicitly advertised the drug.
- One source found that cannabis and cannabis-related products (like cannabis oil, THC vape liquids, and synthetic versions of cannabis) accounted for 45% of drug-related content in young people's feeds. Some young people also saw content related to drugs that fall into the category of psychedelics and hallucinogens (psilocybin mushroom, LSD, MDMA, and ketamine). Stimulants (cocaine, amphetamines, and mephedrone) and depressants also appeared on some feeds, but less often.

4.3 – Dangerous Online Challenges and Unsafe Products

WHAT IT MEANS

Some online content encourages young people to try risky challenges or use unsafe products. These challenges can be really dangerous and sometimes even life-threatening. One example is the "Blackout Challenge," which dares users to asphyxiate themselves and has led to many injuries and even deaths. Other trends like the "Tide Pod Challenge" may seem silly at first glance, but can result in serious health consequences. There's also research showing that dangerous car and train "surfing" challenges are easily accessible on a teen social media account.

HOW COMMON IT IS

While it's hard to quantify how many people are actually participating in dangerous online challenges after viewing them online, many of the most popular videos from past dangerous trends like the cinnamon, fire, and salt/ice challenges have millions of views across social media platforms. A systematic review of social media challenges from 2000–2024 analyzed 54 papers, in which the most common platforms discussed were YouTube and TikTok. The most discussed population was adolescents aged 12–18. While injuries like burns and poisoning are the most common outcomes, other serious injuries have also occurred.

4.4 - Online Communities or Content that Encourage Self-Harm or Suicide

WHAT IT MEANS

Some online groups and posts talk about hurting yourself or ending your life. They might give advice on how to do it, encourage it, or even show graphic pictures of people engaging in self-harm behavior, like cutting. Such posts glorify self-harm that puts impressionable, vulnerable viewers at risk.

HOW COMMON IT IS

A study in 2025 found that 50% of adolescents saw self-harm content in an eight-week period, and that exposure to this content was a short-term risk factor for personal self-harm. Researchers tested Instagram's safety features by creating a private self-harm network of ten people on the social media platform, five of whom were under 18 and as young as 13. They posted 85 disturbing images, and none were taken down, even though Instagram claims it uses AI tools to detect this type of content. In fact, Instagram's system actually helped connect these fake accounts to more harmful accounts/profiles – increasing the potential harm. TikTok had similar problems; after less than 15 minutes of pausing on or "liking" body image and mental health related videos, the researcher's accounts were recommended self-harm and suicide videos.

Gaming addiction has been linked to suicidal ideation. Online gaming and messaging platforms are places that young people will look for connection and support when feeling depressed. However, young people are at risk of encountering bad actors in gaming spaces, such as those who lure young people via in-game chats, grooming them under the guise of shared gaming interests, and encouraging them to self-harm on camera. Yet simultaneously, there are organizations like Stack Up that train members of the community to respond to mental health crises, and provide resources for those who lack agency.

4.5 – CALMER Strategies to Prevent and Manage Physical Health Risks and Harms

- **Establish clear rules and expectations** about the use of substances and explain your reasoning. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has an online library with tip sheets to help parents have productive conversations with their kids about a variety of topics, including alcohol and drug use and prescription drug use. The National Alliance for Eating Disorders provides ways to start conversations with your kids about this sensitive topic.
- **Know who your teens are hanging out with and where they are hanging out, online and offline.** Taking action offline to protect against your teen starting to use harmful substances is vital. Spending time with peers who view tobacco, alcohol, or drug use favorably, and who use these substances themselves, is a strong predictor of whether a teen will start using them.
- **Understand the issues teens face.** The National Eating Disorders Association offers a guide that highlights common body image concerns. If the concern is substance abuse, learn about the substance in question, the forms it takes, what it's called, how teens get access to it, and how it is being described online and offline. SAMHSA has a starter guide for how to talk to your child about substance use and abuse.
- **Understand that pushing too hard can be harmful.** For children experiencing severe mental health issues, it's important to be careful when talking to them about self harm. The goal is to offer support, not to elicit shame. The National Institute of Mental Health has an extensive resource on how to understand and approach a situation where your child is having trouble with mental health. Above all, remember that seeking external help in serious situations is sometimes necessary.

- **Encourage healthy habits and self-esteem.** Although this might be a general expectation of parenting, it is especially important in the online context, since many young people try to cultivate images of perfection online. For more tips and resources to support conversations around body image and self-esteem in a digital world, explore the California Partners Project's Nourishing Mind and Body Family Guide.
- **Report unsafe products** to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission: www.saferproducts.gov. Use the "Report" feature on social media apps to flag harmful content. For example, TikTok lets you report dangerous challenges directly in the app via TikTok Safety. Here are some resources on reporting on other social media sites: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube.

Conversation Starters

I've noticed some changes in your diet recently. Can we talk about it?

Do you follow any influencers on social media? What do they post about? How do their posts make you feel?

Do you see posts about drinking or drugs on social media? How do these posts make you feel?

WHAT TO DO IF YOU NEED EXTERNAL HELP

- If your child is struggling with mental health issues and/or substance use disorders, reach out to the SAMHSA lifeline 24/7 at **1-800-662-HELP (4357).**

SECTION 5: SEXUAL EXPLOITATION & CONTENT RISKS AND HARMS

5.1 – Sexual Content and Interactions Teens Share

Some online harms relate to sexual contact and content, both consensual (including peer-based behaviors like sexting) and unwanted (including adult-initiated contact and abuse).

WHAT IT MEANS
As kids become teenagers, they go through a lot of changes, including how they feel about other people. It's normal for teens to feel attracted to others and want to explore social relationships like dating. In our modern world, these relationships don't just happen in person, they often happen online too. Teens might chat, flirt, "sext," or even start relationships through social media or texting. Young people should not be shamed for this behavior, but they also should not be pressured to share nudes or engage in sexual conversations, even if their peers are comfortable doing so.

Some teens may engage in sexual interactions online with teens they know offline. This may also occur with teens they *only* know online. Some teens use online dating applications that were designed for adults, like Tinder, Grindr, Hinge, Bumble, or Tagged. Some might even use pornography websites designed for users 18 years or older.

Sometimes, kids share sexual content they take of themselves with other kids, referred to as "sexting" or "sending nudes." This might initially unfold consensually within the context of a romantic relationship between peers, but can quickly spiral into harm if the content is redistributed without consent. This progression can lead to nonconsensual intimate imagery (NCII) being shared. Likewise, kids may pressure other kids to share sexual content of themselves, and this is not okay either. Friends might also share images of peers without their consent. It's important to remind your child that these actions are extremely harmful for the victim, and can quickly lead to images being shared beyond the intended boundaries. Sharing images with others nonconsensually can result in a person becoming an unintended perpetrator of online sexual misconduct.

HOW COMMON IT IS
Thorn's annual 2024 research report about online safety focuses on online experiences of those aged 9–17 in the US. Their 2024 annual report shows:

- About 1 in 4 (25%) teens say they've had an online sexual interaction with someone they believed to be a peer. About the same number say they've done this with someone they believed to be an adult.
- About 1 in 9 (11%) teens say they've shared their own self-generated child sexual abuse material (CSAM) with someone they believed to be under the age of 18. Mostly, they do this with someone they know offline. About 28% of this group say they've shared self-generated CSAM with someone they believed to be an adult.
- Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) teens think it's normal for people their age to share nudes.
- About 1 in 6 (17%) have used dating apps. About 1 in 8 (13%) have used a pornography site, and boys are more likely than girls to do so.

5.2 – Unwanted Sexual Content & Contact

WHAT IT MEANS

About 1 in 5 teens have seen unwanted sexual content online. Some kids see sexual images or videos online – through ads, websites, social media, or direct messaging/texts. For many kids, this type of exposure can often be accidental, confusing, or even traumatic, especially if they weren't looking for it. Others may intentionally seek it out.

One of the biggest online risks involves harmful content related to sexual abuse or exploitation of kids and teens. Unfortunately, there are many scenarios that can result in this type of content. These sexual harms are often carried out by someone the victim knows, making it critical to understand that this is more than a "stranger danger" issue. Adult sexual contact or adult-developed sexual content involving minors online can take several forms, including:

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

Some adults take or make sexual pictures or videos of children without permission, including through the use of AI tools. Developmentally, kids are too young to understand or agree to this, and cannot give real consent. This is child sexual abuse, and it is illegal. The correct term for these types of images and videos is Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).

Child Sexual Exploitation Material

Even when the content doesn't depict sexually explicit material, it can still make kids look or seem sexual, and that's not okay either. It is still harmful and may be considered obscene and illegal depending on the severity. Sometimes this type of sexualized content acts to desensitize kids as they're exposed to increasingly sexual content.

Grooming, Exploitation, and Coercion

Kids can also be tricked, pressured, or groomed into creating or sharing their own sexual images. This might happen through online chats, challenges, threats, or promises, and is called exploitation or coercion. Even if the child takes the photo themselves, they are still being abused. Legally, this counts as CSAM too.

It often starts small. A person may act friendly at first to build a relationship, but escalates the situation through increasing demands. This process is called grooming. The abuser pressures the child into doing things they're uncomfortable with. For young people, this can be difficult to spot because abusers can appear at first to be friendly and their intentions are not immediately clear.

Many cases come from groups of online scammers pretending to be teens on apps like Instagram or Snapchat. These scammers target schools, sports teams, and youth groups by creating fake accounts and preying on kids. Some predators even use AI apps to help them with their scams.

AI-Generated CSAM

AI can amplify this harm, and it is still against the law. Anyone can now use "nudify" apps, deepfake tools, or other AI programs to create sexual images or videos of children. These can often look very real, and they cause real harm, traumatizing or retraumatizing victims, spreading lies about young people, and encouraging more abuse. In the U.S. and many other places, creating, sharing, or possessing AI-generated CSAM is a crime, just like photos or videos captured on a camera, computer, or cell phone.

Sextortion and Financially Motivated Sextortion

Some people use platforms to trick kids into sending inappropriate pictures. As seen with grooming, exploitation, and coercion, many perpetrators initially obtain images consensually, but then later use the photos against the victim. Perpetrators may use those pictures to blackmail or threaten the victim, using phrases like, "Do this or I'll post your photo." That type of behavior is called sexual extortion or "sextortion."

If someone your child has met online has posed as someone else and convinced them to share intimate, sexual photos or videos of themselves, and has then threatened to share those images and demanded money, your child may have been the target of financially motivated sextortion. This is a serious federal crime, and it's not your or your child's fault. Read the FBI's overview of financially motivated sextortion to learn more.

HOW COMMON IT IS
These harms may be rare but are very serious. While a relatively small number of young people face this danger compared to other online risks, when it happens, it often causes deep emotional pain, trauma, shame, fear, and in tragic cases, even self-harm or suicide.

While sextortion doesn't happen to most young people, the numbers are rising quickly, especially in countries like the U.S., Canada, and Australia. In 2024 in the U.S. alone, 29,568 cases were reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) in one year.

According to Thorn, 1 in 3 young people reported being asked to share sexual imagery of themselves while they were under the age of 18 by someone they had met online, and 11% reported they believed their friends or classmates had used AI to generate nudes of peers. It can be very challenging for victims to come forward and seek help for these kinds of harm, and so it's crucial to support victims when they do.

5.3 – CALMER Strategies to Prevent and Manage Sexual Exploitation & Content Risks and Harms

- **For consensual sharing:** It is extremely important to talk to your child about the importance of regular, open dialogue around topics like online sexual health. Being safe, not sharing nude images, and following best practice guidelines can help reduce the chances of experiencing unintended consequences. Although it may feel awkward at times, parents must be a trusted source, creating a safe space for children to speak up about harms they may be experiencing.
- **Speak with your child** about what constitutes healthy relationships with adults in their lives, and how exploitative or grooming dynamics begin and take root.
- **Review trusted resources** like the California Partners Project's toolkit on how to speak with your child about pornography and child pornography. A few key points include acknowledging that curiosity is natural, making space for conversations and questions, and reinforcing the idea that sexual content online is often not representative of real life.
    - Additionally, the Mama Bear Effect has great resources about talking to children of different age groups about sexual harms.
    - Sex and health educator Shafia Zaloom has great books and resources for parents on how to navigate the complexity of teen culture and relationships.
    - If you are confused on what "nudify" apps are, or how they could be used to extort someone, FOSI has a brief resource to help explain them. Thorn has resources for parents about sextortion and understanding sexual online harms, including conversation starters for kids of different ages.

The Department of Homeland Security also has resources to identify and protect children against sextortion, including places to report incidents.

Conversation Starters

Dating is so different now with social media and texting and everything. What do you think makes you feel comfortable talking to someone you like online? Is there anything that makes you feel uncomfortable?

How do you figure out what to share and what not to share online? Does this change depending on the person you're talking to or the platform you're using?

I know this might be awkward, but I want to talk to you about sharing nude images online. I want to make sure you're safe.

- **Guide kids** to age-appropriate websites, games, and apps and give them skills to navigate encounters with inappropriate or scary content.
- **Use parental controls** to help monitor, filter, or block harmful content. Paid apps like Net Nanny or Qustodio are helpful for customizing content controls and what you allow your child to access. Apple Families and Google Family Link are free options for parents as well.
- **Report inappropriate content** to the platform directly using the app's built-in tools, as well as to the child's school or school district if it concerns a peer or adult they know in real life. If the abuse is happening in person, it's often better to report it directly to the police, and if it's an emergency, call **911**. Here is the Department of Homeland Security's guide to reporting online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

WHAT TO DO IF IT HAPPENS

- **It's crucial to act quickly** if your child has seen or experienced something uncomfortable or wrong, like unwanted sexual messages or contact. Report it right away. Use official organizations like the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)'s CyberTipline and contact your local police to help make sure the situation is reported and handled safely.
- The Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force also has a state-by-state contact guide and cyber helpline to connect you quickly with someone who can help with next steps.
- **Take it down.** To help remove or stop the spread of online nude images for those under 18, you can use the service Take It Down. This can be done anonymously, thus protecting young people who fear retaliation.
- **Seek out emotional and psychological support:**
    - Call or chat with someone at RAINN (National Sexual Assault Hotline) at **1-800-656-**

HOPE for emotional support.

- Reach out to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at nctsn.org.
- If the scam includes money or international individuals, report it to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center.
- If your child has experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse in the context of participating in a sport (e.g., if the adult harming them is a coach), you can contact the U.S. Center for Safe Sport, which accepts reports of sexual misconduct or harassment, child abuse (including child sexual abuse), and intimate relationships involving an imbalance of power. Make a report online, or call **1-833-5US-SAFE (1-833-587-7233)**.

SECTION 6: INFORMATION & INFLUENCE RISKS AND HARMS

6.1 – Algorithms-Driven Harms

WHAT IT MEANS

Social media algorithms make it easy for kids to stay glued to their screens. Apps like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat are built to maximize engagement; the longer users stay, the more ads they see. These algorithms aren't designed to educate or support healthy growth; their main goal is to hold attention as long as possible.

An algorithm is a set of computer programmed rules that decide which posts or videos to show someone based on online behavior patterns, including what they post, look at, "like," share, or comment on. Most social media apps employ these algorithms. The algorithm anticipates what a person might want to see next. For example, if people watch a lot of sports videos, apps will show them more sports content. The same concept applies to music, makeup, and other topics. On the surface, this can be a positive feature, because people don't have to go out of their way to find content that they enjoy. At the same time, these algorithms can present significant challenges when sufficient safeguards are not in place:

1. You see more of what you already like, but you might be missing out on new interests or diverse perspectives and experiences.
2. Algorithms can change what you think is "normal." When we keep seeing the same kinds of opinions, body types, lifestyles, clothing, etc., it can start to feel normal. This is called an "echo chamber" where algorithms reinforce existing beliefs by repeating similar views and omitting opposing perspectives.
3. Extreme, violent, or highly emotional content spreads faster online – posts that make people feel angry, excited, or shocked get more attention, leading algorithms to push them to more people in order to drive engagement.

HOW COMMON IT IS

Most popular social media platforms use engagement-based algorithms. These types of algorithms have become the norm, despite the fact that they are known to increase in-group and emotionally aligned posts, reducing access to diverse opinions. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), and LinkedIn have complex algorithms that optimize for engagement, rather than for enjoyment or access to your friends' posts.

6.2 – Mis/Disinformation

Engagement-focused algorithms don't just extend screen time; they can also subtly guide teens toward content that confuses, unsettles, or reshapes their worldview. This includes false information, hate speech, and violent and/or sexually explicit material. This kind of content is often hard for parents to spot. It's important to know what to look out for and how to respond. In the age of AI, it is easier than ever to spread false information online via social media and other outlets.

WHAT IT MEANS
Misinformation is when someone shares inaccurate or wrong information by accident, without the intention to mislead.

Disinformation is when someone spreads false information on purpose to trick or manipulate people.

Both can affect how youth understand the world, especially when it's about more serious topics like health, politics, or gender issues.

HOW COMMON IT IS
A study found that 60% of teens aged 13–17 believed four (of a total eight) or more harmful conspiracy theories. That number jumped to 69% for teens who spend four or more hours a day on social media. Although research on AI is still emerging, CNET estimates that 94% of adults who use social media believe they encounter content that was created or altered by AI.

6.3 – Hate Speech, Racism, and Misogyny

WHAT IT MEANS
Hate speech occurs when someone attacks another person or group of people based on things like race, religion, sex/gender, sexual orientation, or nationality. It can also include comparing people to animals or dehumanizing them. This kind of content can be very upsetting and harmful, especially to young people. Research shows that boys and young men may be targeted by algorithms that promote this type of content, whether or not they are looking for it. The same researchers also found that "manosphere" content frequently includes hateful or degrading messages about women.

HOW COMMON IT IS

- 80% of U.S. teens said they've seen hate speech online in the past month, according to a 2023 survey.
- 25% of daily social media users report seeing hate speech every time or most times they use their personal social media account.

- In one study, it was found that Black and Black multiracial teens in the U.S. experienced an average of 3 racially motivated incidents a day on social media that included racial discrimination, algorithmic bias, or exposure to traumatic racial events.

6.4 – CALMER Strategies to Prevent and Manage Information & Influence Risks and Harms

- **Talk to your kids about what they see online and encourage them to think critically** about whom they follow and what they see online. Ask follow-up questions when they share stories that seem extreme or come from unknown sources. This is especially important because there are many people using AI to deceive others online. Using social media features like "Show me less of this" and "Not interested" can help curate feeds so children are seeing more positive content, while avoiding things that may be uninteresting or harmful. The Australian government's eSafety commission has a great resource on how to think critically about online posts.

Conversation Starters

What types of content do you see on social media? How do they make you feel?

Do you ever see upsetting posts on social media? What do you do when this happens?

Can we take a look at the settings on your social media accounts? Maybe we can change some settings so you see fewer things that are upsetting.

- **Use parental controls** to help monitor, filter, or block harmful content. Paid apps like Net Nanny or Qustodio are helpful for customizing content controls and what you allow your child to access. Apple Families and Google Family Link are free options for parents as well.
- **Increase your own awareness** on how to spot fake information, using resources from The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), Media Literacy Now, or The News Literacy Project
- **Learn more about how algorithms work** by exploring a social media algorithms 101 resource for parents from Children and Screens. You can also check out Harvard's Center for Digital Thriving's video on design tricks that apps use to keep your attention.
- **Encourage kids to talk to trusted adults and use the "Report" button** on apps like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat to flag false information or report suspicious posts and fake news.
- **Report:** If it involves threats or illegal activity, contact the police directly. Here are some resources on how to report and block people on popular social media sites: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube.

SECTION 7: COMMERCIAL & FINANCIAL RISKS AND HARMS

7.1 – Scams

WHAT IT MEANS

An online scam is a trick that is meant to get someone to reveal personal identifiable information in order to gain access to money, accounts, or other private information. Scams can appear online, on social media, and through email. "Phishing" is a form of a scam in which someone pretends to be an official entity such as a school, bank, or company by including organization logos or other official-looking elements in correspondence. Sometimes they pretend to be someone the recipient knows who is in trouble and needs help. In any event, the people or organizations doing the "phishing" are throwing out bait to see who will "bite" and get hooked in the scam.

HOW COMMON IT IS

Based on a recent report completed in Australia, about 25% of kids aged 13–17 have fallen victim to scams on social media. In the same study, 10% fell victim to buying and selling scams, where someone pretends to offer or want a product or service, and then scams financial information or payment out of the victim.

Unfortunately, children are particularly susceptible to scams and identity theft because they are less likely to be monitoring their credit or tracking where their personal identifying information is going on the internet. While adults use their Social Security number somewhat frequently to qualify for various purchases, it may be years before a child does something similar and discovers that their identity has been stolen.

The Identity Theft Resource Center, a great place to get help after identity theft has happened, has an article on protecting your child, both proactively and after theft occurs. According to Javelin research:

- Identity theft happens to about 1 in 50 children in the U.S. every year – about 1.25 million.
- The average U.S. family loses more than $1,000 when a child is hit with identity fraud.
- Fraud committed by family or friends accounts for about 80% of all child-identity theft loss.

7.2 – Gambling/Online Betting

WHAT IT MEANS

Online gambling is becoming more and more commonplace. Frequent advertisements and constant accessibility on apps means that it is relatively easy for young people to gamble, even if it's illegal for them to do so. Betting on sports is one of the most common forms of gambling for people under 21, and apps like Fanatics Sportsbook, DraftKings, and FanDuel market extremely aggressively.

Apps like PolyMarket and Kalshi have allowed people to bet on basically anything because of recent changes to legislation around "prediction markets." Although these companies assert these markets are not gambling, the financial risk is essentially identical, and can be dangerous for young people who don't understand these risks.

Young men and women are specifically targeted by gambling companies because forming gambling habits early can lead to lifelong customers and profits. Although marketing is often targeted at young men of legal gambling age (18+ in most states), there is also also spillover into minors.

HOW COMMON IT IS

Based on systematic review and analyses of data from studies of adolescent gambling around the globe, a 2024 study in The Lancet public health journal reported:

- About 17.9% of adolescents globally have gambled online in the past 12 months.
- Among adolescents, boys were more likely than girls to engage in problematic gambling behaviors that may disrupt personal, family, financial, and employment circumstances.

A 2025 report by the Gambling Commission in the UK found that 3 in 10 children ages 11 to 17 spent their own money on gambling in the past 12 months - and that number is rising, up from 27% in 2024.

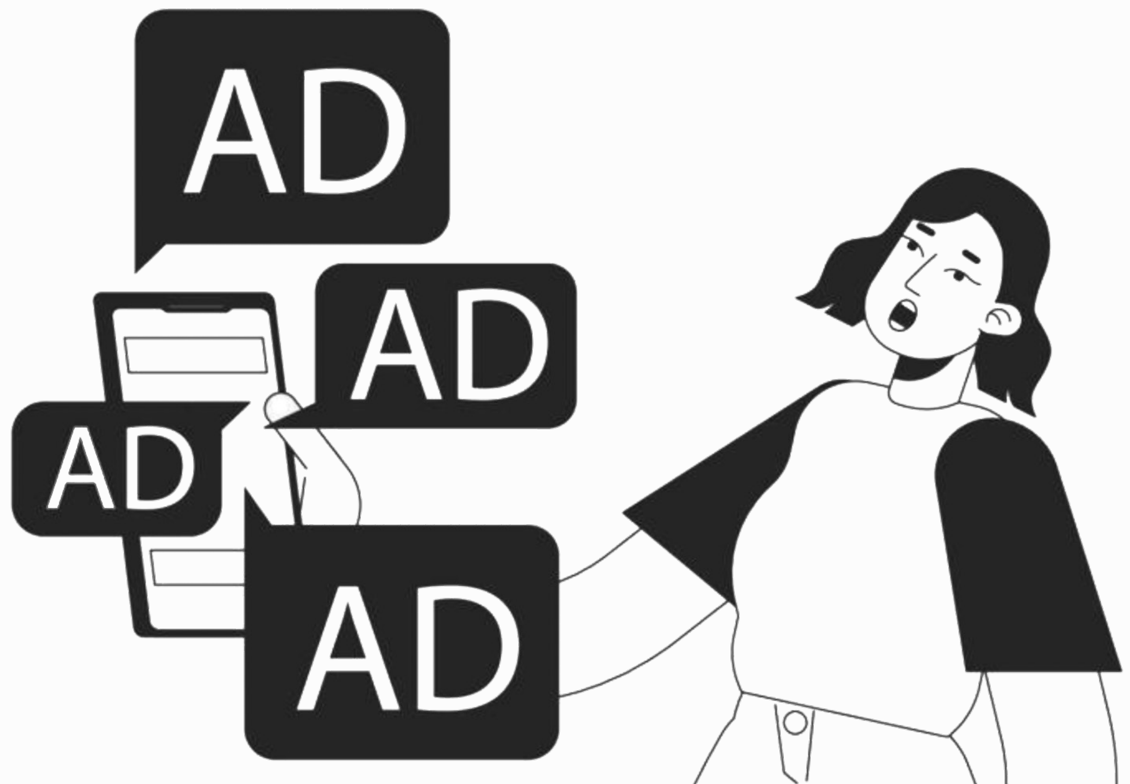
A 2026 report by Common Sense Media shows that more than a third of young men start gambling before they turn 18. This behavior commonly takes place through sports betting (12%) or gambling-like content inside video games (23%), such as loot boxes. 60% of boys say that gambling ads show up in their social media feeds through algorithm-driven recommendations.

7.3 – In-App Purchases – Excessive Spending

WHAT IT MEANS

In-app purchases (often called IAPs) are extra items you can buy while playing free or low-cost apps and games using real money. Think virtual coins, special outfits, extra lives, faster progress, and ad removal. Many popular kids' games use a "freemium" model: They are free to start, but push participants to spend to keep playing or look cool. Games use clever tricks like countdown timers ("Buy now before it's gone!") or surprise reward boxes. They may even make the game harder to play without paying. Kids, especially younger ones, do not always realize that those clicks charge real money to a credit card. One quick "yes" can lead to hundreds or thousands of dollars being spent before parents become aware.

Given their developmental stage, children and teens can often act on impulse and haven't necessarily learned the real value of money yet. A child playing a fun game might feel like they "need" that $4.99 boost to win. A child may see friends with fancy items and want them too. These purchases can feel like gambling because of the excitement rush, which can lead to more spending due to the rush of dopamine to the reward centers in the child's brain. Parents are frequently shocked by surprise charges on their credit card statements from apps their kids seemingly use innocently.



HOW COMMON IT IS

- In the U.S., a survey of parents showed that 67% worry their kids are overspending on mobile games.
- In the UK, a 2025 report on children's spending online showed nearly all kids (97%) play online games.
- Of those surveyed, 53% who play games have spent money on them in the past month.
- Boys aged 13–15 are most likely to spend money while gaming – of those surveyed, 67% spent money in the previous month.
- Shooter gamers were only played by 26% of all gamers, but accounted for 70% of the spending.
- A different UK source says that 37% of children spent money within apps, while 12% accidentally spent money on in-app purchases.

7.4 – CALMER Strategies to Prevent and Manage Commercial & Financial Risks and Harm

- **Talk openly with your teen about how scams work online.** No shame, just facts. Adults can just as easily fall for scams, and talking about them in an honest and humble way can be a good reminder for both parents and children. Explain that "app money" is real money, demonstrate how small charges add up, and agree on rules for spending together.
- **Check the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)'s guide** on how to prevent identity theft.
  - If the scam includes money, people, or organizations operating outside of the U.S., report it to the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center.
- **Turn on built-in device protections**. On iPhones/iPads, go to Settings > Screen Time > [your child's name] > Content & Privacy Restrictions > iTunes & App Store Purchases, and set In-App Purchases to "Don't Allow" (or require a password every time). On Android devices, use Google Play's parental controls or Family Link to require approval for purchases.
- **Educate yourself on online gambling for young people**. Check out this resource for statistics from the National Council on Problem Gambling, and this educational report from Newport Healthcare.

Conversation Starters

Have you seen any gambling ads? It seems like they're everywhere now. What are your thoughts about gambling?

Have you ever heard of anyone who got caught up in an online scam? What happened? Let's talk about some warning signs so we can avoid it happening to us.

I know you love playing online games. Do you spend any money while you play? What do you spend it on?

SECTION 8: GENERATIVE AI RISKS AND HARMS

8.1 – Generative AI Risks and Harms

WHAT IT MEANS
Artificial Intelligence (AI) is widely used to help people complete many tasks. For children and teens, AI can support learning, enhance creativity, and assist with skill-building, but it also has clear downsides. Because AI has developed so quickly, research on its risks for young people is still limited. For naturally curious young people, AI may seem like a "friend" who will always listen, provide information, and give support. We highlight four concerns: AI companions and sycophancy, overreliance on AI tools, fake content, and privacy.

- **AI Companions and Sycophancy:** AI chatbots or AI characters can serve as companions for teens. They are built to seem warm and friendly. Though they are not human, they mimic human language and behaviors. "Sycophancy" is a design mechanism that trains models to compliment and praise a user's opinions and actions. For example, many chatbots reply to users' prompts with phrases like "That's a great idea!" and "You are so smart!" This tendency is designed to keep people feeling good and engaged. Over time, users may struggle to distinguish between AI and a real person. As a result, people may become emotionally dependent on a chatbot or companion. Children are more at risk for this kind of dependence or cognitive crutch, depending on their developmental stage. AI conversations are not always age-appropriate either. Some chats have real-world consequences for users, including (in extreme cases) convincing them to cut ties with family and friends or to harm themselves.

- **Overreliance on AI Tools:** Overuse of AI tools can potentially arrest the development of critical thinking skills in young people. Students may use AI out of convenience or to take a "shortcut," generating answers to schoolwork without ever learning the material. Information generated by AI is not always correct, and users must always fact-check the information and sources provided in such conversations. Overreliance on AI models to meet academic and social needs is akin to "outsourcing" the development of critical thinking, and can make it harder for young people to develop core life skills. It can also lead to accusations of cheating or plagiarism.

- **Fake Content:** As mentioned in other sections, fake content or social media engagement generated by AI is commonplace on many platforms. It's important to realize that AI-generated content is not limited to images, but also includes videos, comments, voice recordings, and sometimes entire profiles. Fake AI content is often made to push one

specific viewpoint's message, whether it be political or social. Although AI content is often shocking, it can still be difficult to distinguish from real images or videos.

- **Privacy:** Whether it's being used for information gathering or conversation, AI models often collect and store data from user interactions, which can be used later by the AI platform outside a user's awareness. It's important to learn about AI privacy rules, and refrain from sharing any personal information when interacting with AI models.

HOW COMMON IT IS

Pew Research found that 64% of American teens use AI in general, and about 30% use it daily, with 16% saying that they use it several times a day or "almost constantly." A Family Online Safety Institute study found that 46% of teen generative AI (GenAI) users have used it for academic purposes.

According to Common Sense Media, nearly 75% of teenagers in the U.S. use AI companions before, and over half say that they use these apps at least a few times a month.

It's difficult to know how common sycophancy-related negative outcomes are (sometimes called "AI-induced psychosis"), but given how damaging these outcomes can be, awareness of its potential is important.

Conversation Starters

Do you feel like a lot of people your age enjoy using or talking to AI? Why do you think that is?

Does talking to an AI chatbot feel different from talking to your friends and family? How so?

Hey, I was wondering if you use AI chatbots or companions? Which ones, and how often?

8.2 CALMER Strategies to Prevent and Manage Generative AI Risks and Harms

- **Learn about AI chatbots and AI companions,** including how they work and potential benefits and harms. There are many useful AI literacy resources and courses available. FOSI, Common Sense Media and OpenAI all have free resources online.
- **Staying up to date** on news surrounding AI, AI chatbots/companions, and common harms associated with them is also incredibly valuable to better understand some of the struggles and pressures young people face in the digital age.
- **Invite conversation with your child** to gain insight into their awareness of and interest in GenAI. Given that AI tools are constantly changing, it's important to check in often and keep communication open.
- **Co-create a family plan specific to AI.** Include agreements on the use of AI tools and how privacy will be protected. Some AI tools are only meant for users 18+, and these platforms may not have any safety features built with minors in mind, so it's important to be clear about which tools your child has access to and permission to use.

SOME THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

It can be hard to tell if a young person is using AI chatbots excessively or in a way that's unhealthy, but here are a few things to look out for.

1. If you find that your child is using chatbots or companions as a replacement for real-world time with family or peers, or being secretive about their GenAI use, this might signal emotional dependence.
2. During stressful times, if you notice your child is turning to AI companions instead of leaning on friends and family, this can also be harmful.
3. If you notice mood changes in your child after they use GenAI or if they refer to AI companions as real people, this is an opportunity to invite non-judgmental conversation to learn more about their AI habits.

What you can do to better understand generative AI and healthy use

If you think your teen may be using AI chatbots or companions to fill their social, personal, or academic time and needs, it is possible they are at risk of forming dependency. Helping your teen evaluate their habits, pause, and connect with peers in the real world may help prevent overreliance on chatbots. This is also an opportunity to think about contacting a mental health professional to help reduce risk of dependency on AI technology.

When it comes to sycophancy, it can be hard for teens to recognize this as a problem, especially because adolescents seek social belonging and affirmation. Reminding your teen that platforms make money off of their engagement and attention might help them rethink the value or appropriateness of this design feature.

As with other sources of fake information, looking at social media videos for potential signs of being AI-generated can help you avoid these "traps." Spotting AI images can be difficult, but using trusted guides and maintaining healthy skepticism can be helpful. In addition, remember that giving out personal information to AI agents, or on social media in general, can lead to breaches in privacy that can be exploited.

What you can do to better understand generative AI and healthy use

Many AI platforms also have helpful parental controls and restrictions. Platforms like Google Gemini and ChatGPT have modes that encourage learning and exploration instead of only giving direct answers to questions. Learning about and engaging with AI can be very useful for education, but with research showing that more than half of kids use AI for school help, doing so in a mindful way is crucial. Asking school leadership about the school's policy on AI use is important, as is speaking with your child directly about your expectations. Outsourcing critical thinking skills to AI can be counterproductive to long-term academic success, and so using it as an enhancement instead of a replacement is vital. The SPARKS Toolkit from The Rithm Project recommends tips for smart AI use, specifically for those aged 13–22.

AI technologies are rapidly evolving and changing. It is critical to have open conversations with your teens about their exposure to GenAI, and encourage them to use it in a way that enhances their intellect, instead of replacing tasks and interactions that they can learn and grow from.

IN CLOSING
STAY CONNECTED, STAY INFORMED

Raising kids in today's digital world is both rewarding and challenging. Social media and online spaces offer incredible opportunities for connection, creativity, learning, and self-expression, but they also introduce real risks that can affect mental health, relationships, safety, and well-being.

As this guidebook has shown, these potential harms include: time and attention issues that disrupt daily life; information influences that shape beliefs; emotional and identity challenges that impact self-worth; interpersonal harms like cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, and harmful content; and commercial pressures that exploit vulnerability.

The good news is that parents, caregivers, and the broader "village" — including schools, community members, relatives, and even young people themselves — have powerful tools to navigate these challenges. Our **CALMER** framework provides a consistent, practical approach: **C**ommunicate openly with curiosity and without judgment, **A**ssess and **A**ddress exposure and its effects, **L**isten and **L**earn from your teen's experiences, **M**onitor and **M**anage use thoughtfully and collaboratively (building trust rather than eroding it), **E**ducate and **E**ncourage on complicated problems to better support your child, and **R**eport illegal or dangerous situations while tapping into **R**esources for support when needed.

Throughout this guidebook, you've seen evidence-based strategies tailored to each category of harm: what it looks like, how common it is, steps for prevention and response, and where to turn for help. **CALMER** serves as a quick-reference guide to reinforce these shared principles: proactive conversations, balanced boundaries, ongoing awareness, and swift action when serious issues arise.

Ultimately, no single strategy will fit every family or every young person. What matters most is flexibility, consistency, and connection. By modeling healthy digital habits yourself, keeping lines of communication open, and approaching online life as a shared journey rather than a battleground, you empower your kids to develop the critical thinking, resilience, and self-advocacy skills they'll need now and in the future.

The online world is here to stay. With parents and kids working together as a team, you can help tilt the balance toward the positive. Your ongoing involvement, calm guidance, and willingness to adapt as platforms evolve make a real difference in ensuring your child is healthy and happy — both now and in the future.

Thank you for reading this guidebook and for the vital work you do every day. Stay connected, stay informed, and know that you are not alone. It takes a village to guide our children safely through this digital landscape.

EMERGENCY RESOURCE GUIDE

If your child is experiencing...	Take this immediate action
Sextortion, Grooming, or CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material)	**Do not delete the messages.** Take screenshots. Report immediately to the **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipline** and your local police. The team at NCMEC operates a 24/7 free call center that can be a first point of contact if you are looking for help with sextortion and you are under 18. Call **1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)** to get started. You can also learn more about sextortion, how to recognize it, and where to report it at **Know2Protect**, a national public awareness campaign developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to educate and empower children, teens, parents, trusted adults, and policymakers to prevent and combat online child sexual exploitation and abuse, including sextortion.
Image-Based Sexual Abuse (peer-to-peer, non-consensual image-sharing)	Go to **takeitdown.ncmec.org** to anonymously request the removal of explicit images from the internet. TakeItDown is a free service operated by the NCMEC that can help you remove or stop the online sharing of nude, partially nude, or sexually explicit images or videos taken of those under 18. You can remain anonymous while using the service and you won't have to send your images or videos to anyone. Take It Down will work on public or unencrypted online platforms that have agreed to participate.

If your child is experiencing...	Take this immediate action
A Mental Health Crisis (Severe anxiety, depression, or self-harm)	Call or text **988** or text **HOME** to **741741** to connect with a trained crisis counselor immediately.
Financial Scams or Fraud	Report the incident to the **FBI IC3** (Internet Crime Complaint Center).
Cyberbullying or Harassment	Take screenshots. Block the user immediately. Use the app's built-in **"Report"** feature to flag the account.
Dangerous Online Challenges	Report the video directly in the app (e.g., TikTok Safety). If it involves a physical product, report it to **saferproduct.gov**.
Tech Abuse from a Dating Partner	If your teen is experiencing online harassment and abuse from a dating partner, contact an expert at Love is Respect for support: loveisrespect.org or text **LOVEIS** to **22522**.

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