

HOW TO PROTECT YOUR TEEN'S
DIGITAL REPUTATION

16 ways to keep your teen out of
trouble online

by Lisa Honold





Center for Online Safety



Wouldn't you like to have a guarantee that your child's future will be unlimited, shiny and bright?

The best way to protect your child's future is to guard their digital reputation and then teach them to protect it. In this guide, you're going to learn how to be intentional with your digital reputation, how to guard and protect it, who influences and sees your reputation and what you can do to make sure your reputation is a good one.

We'll be focused on social media, since this is where most kids run into problems. **Social media** is a website, platform or app that lets users view, interact with, create and share content in a community online.

Most importantly, you'll be able to help your child understand how critical their digital reputation is and how they can protect theirs.

What I want you to know is that you are the perfect person to help your child do this - *even if you're not a tech person and even if you don't understand everything that your child is doing online.*

It's okay. They still want and need your guidance (even if they say they don't)!

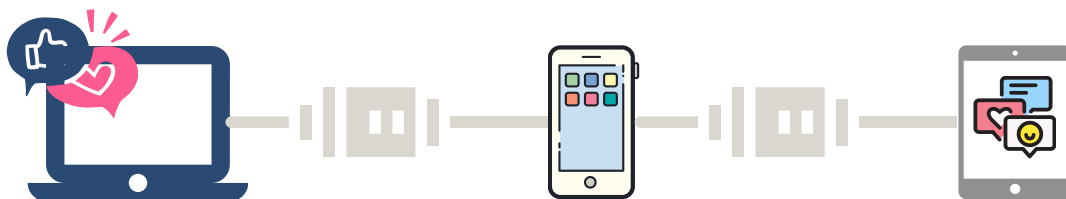
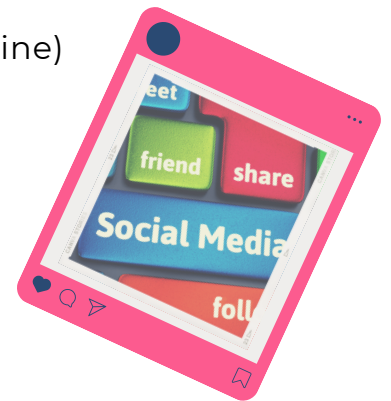
Part One: Your Child's Digital Reputation

What is a Digital Reputation?

A **digital reputation** is all the things a person says and does on the internet, as well as what others believe and say about them. Your digital reputation is affected by all the "**smart devices**" you use that can access the internet - devices such as smart phones, smart watches, iPads, tablets, computers, laptops, security cameras, virtual reality headsets, gaming systems, smart TVs, smart refrigerators, smart cars, smart speakers, etc.

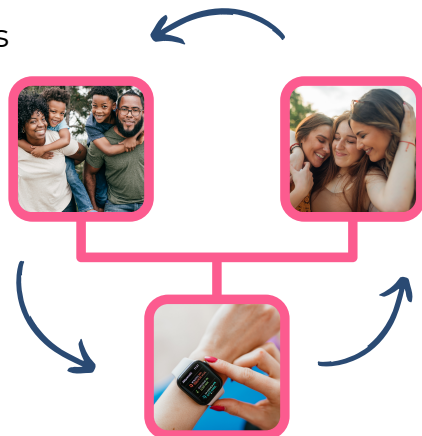
Your digital reputation is a compilation of all of your:

- Internet searches (on Google or another search engine)
- Accounts on social media
- Images you post
- Written posts
- Comments
- Accounts you follow
- Associations with other people online
- View times - what makes you stop scrolling and watch something on social media
- Videos you post
- Videos you watch
- Purchases online
- Emails sent and received



A digital reputation also includes what others say or transmit electronically (on purpose or accidentally, through a hack).
For kids and teens this list includes:

- Parents and guardians
- Extended family and friends
- Peers, friends, and strangers
- School sharing photos, grades, awards, achievements
- Educational apps and software sharing progress and challenges in academic subjects
- Coaches sharing stats, work ethic, achievements
- News articles sharing achievements
- Shows and searches on SmartTVs (Netflix, Hulu, YouTubeTV, Showtime)
- Music and searches on smart speakers (like the Amazon Alexa or Google Home)
- Texts and searches on smartwatches Google and other search engines
- Governmental records, like a social security number or driver's license number
- Data collection sites
- Medical records



A good digital reputation can open doors to your future and a bad one can shut you out of opportunities.

Note - You may hear people say “digital footprint” instead of "digital reputation". They are similar terms. The main difference is that your digital footprint is based on what information is online about you and it's a large or small footprint, while your digital reputation is based on other's perception of the information online about you, so it's a positive or negative reputation.

Visually, a drawing of a digital footprint helps kids see how their activity online can make a smaller or larger footprint.



What gets kids in trouble?

It's hard to comprehend that once they do something online, it never disappears. Once they post a photo or make a comment, it can be found again, even if it is “deleted” or “disappears”. It never goes away!



Social media companies have developed disappearing messaging and private chat groups to make your child believe they can post anything without repercussions. It's simply not true.

What can happen if your child misbehaves online?

There are countless examples of a young person losing out on opportunities because they did something stupid online. Just one mistake can cause the doors of opportunity to close and impact the rest of their life.

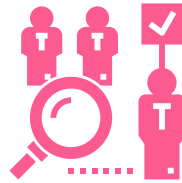
In the worst of cases, kids end up thinking about suicide or even end their lives because they can't see a way through a horrible situation, whether it's severe bullying or someone threatening to expose their nude photos (sextortion).



Some less severe consequences are lost opportunities, including:

- Not getting into college. In 2017 at least 10 admitted Harvard students had their admissions offers rescinded after a group exchange of racist and sexually offensive Facebook messages. And these kids were in a private chat group - they thought they were “safe”.
- Not getting a college scholarship. An incoming student-athlete at North Dakota State University had his scholarship revoked as a result of a series of offensive videos posted to the social media app TikTok.
- Not getting invited to play college sports.

- Not getting offered a job. According to an Inc. article in 2020, 70 percent of employers use social media to screen candidates before hiring and over half of employers surveyed said they chose not to hire a candidate based on content found on their social media profile.
- Not getting into the military. The Pentagon is increasing its social media screening as part of its background check and ongoing evaluation of personnel.



The consequences for a bad digital reputation are enormous, even life-threatening, and it can happen in the blink of an eye.

What types of things could hurt my reputation?

Specifically, your digital reputation could be damaged if you share:

- Provocative, explicit, inappropriate photos or videos
- Discriminatory comments related to race, gender, sexual orientation, religion
- Alcohol or drug misuse
- Evidence of criminal behavior or cheating
- Bullying, doxing, harassing or trolling another person online
- Misinformation or lies
- Inappropriate screen name, profile or bio

Let's take a look at the things you can do to help your child stay out of trouble online, now and in the future, and keep the doors of opportunity open.

1. Google yourself (privately). What comes up first? Once you've vetted the search, google yourself with your child and talk to them about the results. Is there anything you wish you could change? Then google your child's name and search both "all" and "images". If there are photos they do not want to be associated with, minors can follow this process to have them removed:

<https://www.centerforonlinesafety.com/blog/google-photos-remove-minors-koat-news>



2. Don't overshare about yourself or your child online- in emails, social media, chat groups. Oversharing occurs when you share too much private information publicly. In fact, there's a special word for when parents overshare online - it's called **sharenting**.

Also in the category of oversharing is posting embarrassing photos or stories of your child - once you post, you lose control of how the information could be used. According to the terms of service, a social media company has the right to use any photo you post, in any way they see fit, as long as they don't share it with people who aren't allowed to see it based on your privacy settings. Also, other people can download your photo and use it as a tool for bullying or create a meme, without your permission or the permission of your child. (A meme is a humorous graphic with an image, video and/or text, that is shared and spreads rapidly online ("goes viral").

Teach your child not to overshare, about themselves or other people.



3. Normalize asking permission to share a story or photo. Asking permission (also known as "consent") teaches your child that they own their digital reputation and have control over their identity online.

4. Don't share private information - your child's name, identity (through tags or facial recognition), school, age, home address should all stay private. This means taking a careful look at your photos before sharing - Is your child wearing a sweatshirt with a school logo? Does the photo with your house in the background show the address plaque?

5. Understand the business model of free social media platforms and free video games. They are “free” to you because the companies are selling your data, habits, searches, location, friends, preferences - even when you’re not using their platform!

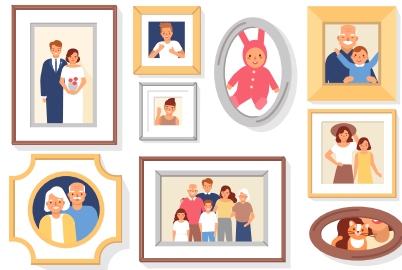


6. Lock down your social media accounts - use the safety and privacy features (under “settings” in your social media account) to minimize what can be learned about you and sold to others. Keep your social media accounts private, not public, so only your friends can see what you post and share. Turn location off (under “settings” in your social media account) and GPS off (under “settings” on your phone), except when you need it to navigate.



7. Talk to grandparents and other friends and family who may want to post photos and text that accidentally disclose private information. Make sure they understand your perspective and will follow your lead for safety.

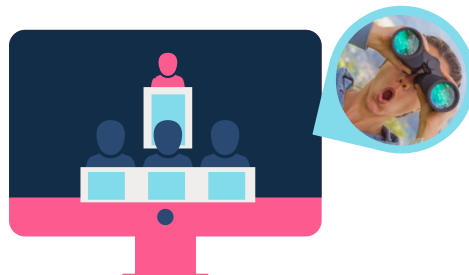
Share photos and videos with close friends and family off of social media. Use a secure file-sharing app like Dropbox or a photo-sharing app that has end-to-end encrypted messaging, like Signal, WhatsApp, or Apple's iMessage.



8. Remember everything online is permanent and stays forever, even if it “disappears” or says “private.”



9. Assume everything online is public, even if it says “private”. Going back to the Harvard students’ private group chat that was discovered - nothing is truly private online.



Your child needs to know a “private” group or chat online isn’t ever really private. Here are just a few ways it can become public:

- Someone in the group screenshots it and shares it
- Someone in the group reports it to the platform
- Someone in the group shows another person
- The platform can change policies and decide to make it public suddenly
- The platform can have a bug or technology fail and accidentally make it public

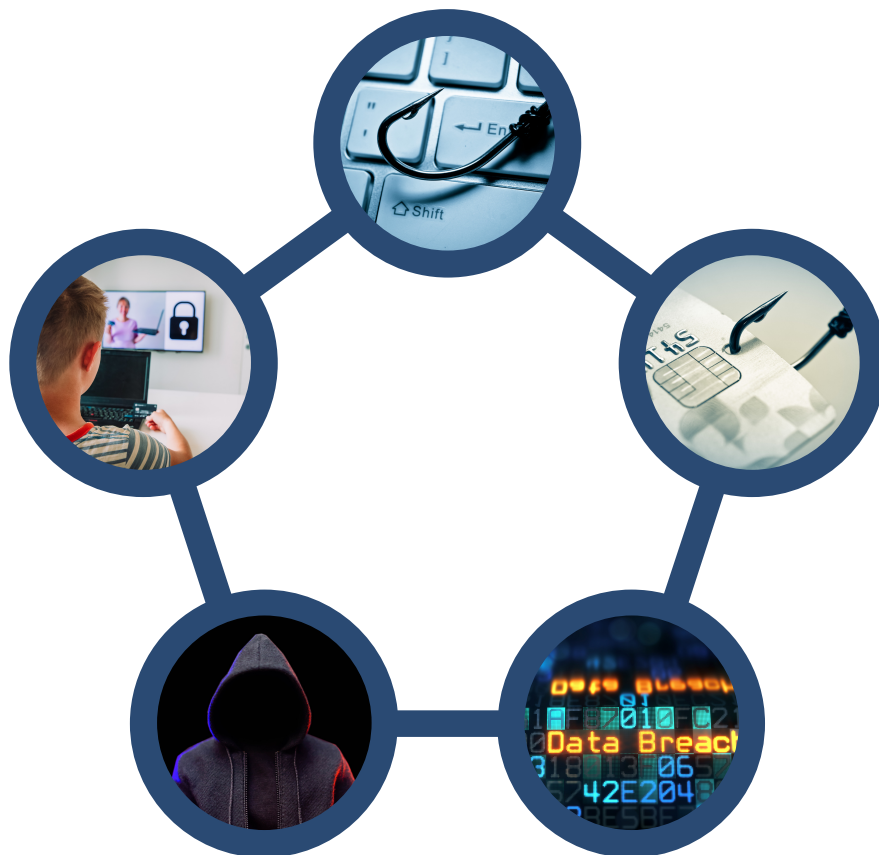


10. Ask why an organization needs your personal information before you provide it. The more places that have your personal information, the more likely it will be stolen and used by bad guys. Some doctors’ offices still ask for your social security number in their paperwork. They don’t need it!



11. Don't respond to texts, emails or telephone calls from strangers or from banks or credit card companies, even if they look legitimate. Instead, take time to go to an internet browser, type in their website and login or call them on their 800 number. Scammers hunt for your sensitive information by emailing you, hoping you'll respond, and if they get your confidential information, they can access bank accounts, credit cards, lines of credit and open new accounts that you won't even know about until the bills come.

This is called **phishing** - when a bad guy sends emails, messages or texts supposedly from reputable companies in order to get you to reveal personal information, such as passwords and credit card numbers.



Sometimes if you look carefully at the website address (“URL”), you’ll see it looks odd. For instance, the real business URL might be realbusiness.com while this URL is realbusiness.corn. Yes, that’s CORN at the end, not COM. Tricky!

Other times, if you hover your mouse over the link, you’ll see a completely different website. Even if it looks legitimate, it’s safer to type in the actual website, rather than click any links that may be fake or launch a virus.



12. Don’t engage with strangers over text messaging, social media or gaming platforms. There are lots of safety reasons to stick with only people you know.

I want to mention two dangers that are more likely to happen with strangers:

Sextortion - when someone coerces you to send explicit videos or photos online then threatens to blackmail you if you don't give them what they want.

Cyberbullying - using texts, chats, messages, posts or social media to harass, threaten or intimidate someone.

Learn more here: <https://www.centerforonlinesafety.com/resources>

13. Teach your child to identify trusted adults in their life and when to ask an adult for help.

HELP!

14. Start your teen off slowly on social media. Delay setting up social media accounts until your child is at least 13 years old. Not only is it better for their development, it's the law. A child under 13 cannot set up accounts on social media legally and may be removed if they have an underage account.

When your teen is ready for a social media account, start with one account on one platform, not all of the options at once. Be sure to set up your account on the same platform, so you can follow your child's social media accounts.



Check in regularly. Ask who they follow online, the businesses, the influencers, the accounts. Sit with them while they scroll their favorite social media - what comes up? Are they providing healthy messages?

15. Limit your child's time online. Screens should be a part of the day, but not available the entire day. It's too easy to lose track of time and not accomplish the goals and responsibilities they have.

[See our Five Circles of Safety Resource.](#) and our post about [Setting Limits.](#)

16. Pause & Ask - parents and other adults can model and teach this two part strategy when sharing online.

- Pause. Before posting or commenting in response, pause and take a breath.
- Ask yourself - is this a good idea? Why do I want to post or comment?

Part Two: Conversations to have with your child or teen



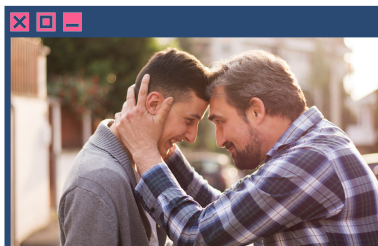
1. You matter. I love you. Nothing you could do would make me stop loving you.



“ You are so loved. When you need help, no matter what, I am here and there’s nothing you could ever do to make me stop loving you. There is no mistake so big that we can’t get through it together. You will get into situations that feel horrible, that might even feel like you could never overcome them, but I promise you, you can.

I always want what’s best for you.

I’m going to screw up along the way but I’m really trying to be the best parent I can be. I know you’re growing up and eager for more freedom and we’re working toward that, but I have to keep my priority on safety. ”

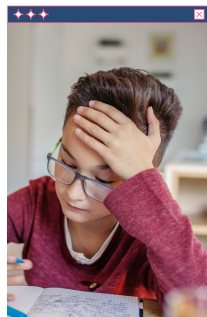




2. I want to be a safe, trusted adult when you need one. Who else is in your circle that you could go to for help?

“ I want to be someone you can go to for help and advice when you need it. But I understand that you may feel more comfortable going to another adult sometimes, so let’s make a list of who is in your life that you could trust to help in hard situations. When you’re in a hard situation, it’s tough to think about who can help.

You might be tempted to try to figure it out on your own. Please don’t. It’s easy to think in circles, to get completely freaked out when you’re all alone.



You might be tempted to ask a friend’s advice or ask them to help. Please don’t rely on your friends. They don’t have the life experience and perspective to give you good advice.

You might be tempted to find advice in a group chat or on a social media page. Please don’t. They don’t have your best interests at heart. In fact, they may be looking for drama or to hurt others. ”

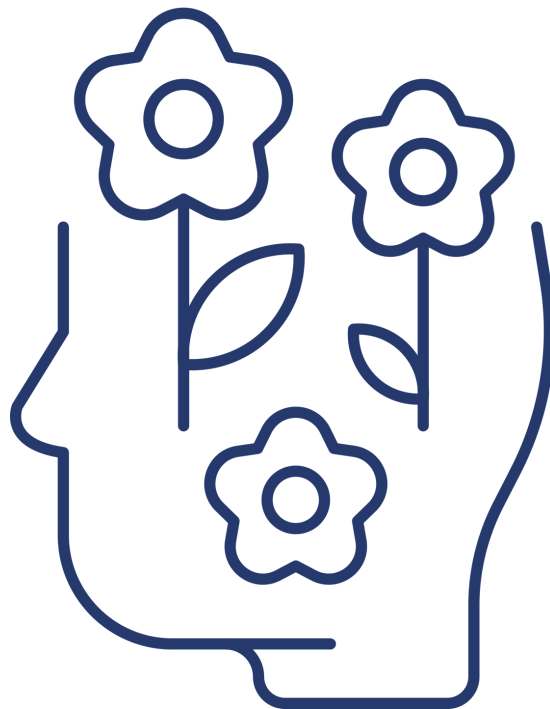
I never want you to feel alone.



3. What you do online matters. What you say on social media matters. What you view matters. What you fill your mind with matters.

“ Be careful with the thoughts and ideas you put into your brain. Once you see something, you can't unsee it. The internet is full of fantastic and uplifting content, but it's just as full of harmful, dangerous content.

Be careful with the thoughts and ideas you put out into the world. You're either contributing to the uplifting content or the harmful content and it matters.



Everything you say and do online paints a picture of who you are and either opens the doors of opportunity to you or closes them. ”



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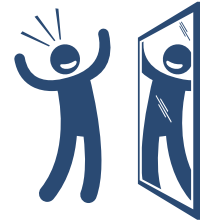


5. It's not just what you do on the internet that affects your digital reputation - you're also affected by what others are saying about you.

“ Lots of people influence your digital reputation, including me!

Be careful in group chats - it's easy for them to go negative and if you're associated with hate speech or bullying, even if you didn't do it - you watched and did nothing - it affects your reputation.

Your friends reflect on you - either positively or negatively



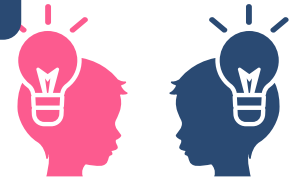
You have friends in your life right now who are making bad choices online. They're making choices that are going to cost them the rest of their lives potentially and someday they will regret their choices. The doors of opportunity are closing for them.

You also have friends who are making great choices, choices that are shining a light on their good character. These choices are leading them closer to getting a job, going to school, having opportunities, making money and supporting themselves in the future. For these friends the doors of opportunity are opening wide and their future is unlimited.

I want you to be in the second group, with the friends who are being thoughtful and intentional online and who think before they post or respond online.”



6. When you think about who you're spending your time online with, do they reflect well on you? Are they people you want to be associated with?



“Your friends and associations reflect on you - either positively or negatively. Think about the social media accounts you follow - the tone and the character of the accounts, the videos you watch, the group chats, the gaming. Is it uplifting? Or depressing?

You can change your feed to be more uplifting. You can change who you're gaming with or the types of games you're playing. You can control what you're exposed to, to a large extent.”

There are two quotes that illustrate what we're talking about:

1. “Show me your friends and I'll show you your future.” In other words, based on your friends, I can predict the opportunities that will be available (or not) to you.
2. 'You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with' by Jim Rohn. Who are the five friends you spend the most time with? Would you be happy to have them represent you and influence your reputation?



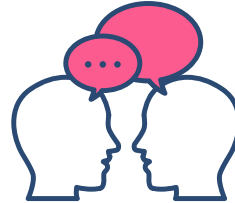


7. Let's get started

“ Do you see the value in cleaning up your digital reputation, starting now? ”

Here's how to get started. We'll break this down into four areas of focus.

- Content
- Settings
- Hard conversations
- Mental health and wellness



Content

- Spend some time going through your accounts and what you've published - delete posts, videos and photos that don't reflect the best you.
- Clean up who you follow. Do their posts make you feel good about the world? Good about yourself? Or not? Raise your standards. You are worth it.
- Understand that many of your friends are using filters and aren't feeling okay about their actual bodies.
- Ask yourself, would my digital reputation be okay if my sweet little grandma saw this? (If that doesn't work, think about your future boss. Would it be okay if your boss saw it?)
- Assume everything is PUBLIC
- Assume "private" chats or groups are PUBLIC
- Assume everything is FOREVER
- Ask other people to not send you garbage (memes, images, mean chats)
- Practice consent, giving permission to use your image and asking consent before posting photos with other people

- Don't ask for or send nudes. Ever.
- If anyone shares a nude photo, delete it, especially if they are under 18 years old. Depending on the circumstance, you could get in legal trouble, even go to jail, if you have a nude photo on your phone, even if you didn't ask for it. Every state law is different.

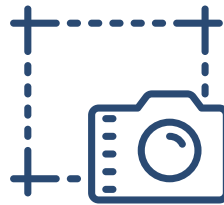


- While we're talking about nudes, if a stranger starts flirting with you on Instagram or Snapchat, DON'T RESPOND. I know it can feel good to get their attention and be noticed, but they don't have your best interest at heart. They're scammers. Don't fall for it.
- Don't turn on your camera or video. Don't move to a different platform like Discord. Don't send nudes or allow your camera to be on. You will regret it and it could ruin your life.
- The bad guy or girl flirting with you will use your photo or video against you and threaten you with exposing your photos or videos to everyone on your social media feeds if you don't pay them (this is called extortion or sextortion). Or they will ask you to meet in person and this will end in sexual assault, rape or sex trafficking. Or they will want you to send more videos or photos and you'll be on the hook to provide them, or get exposed.

CAUTION

- If this has already happened to you, I'm so sorry. It feels horrible to be taken advantage of. What I want you to remember is, you're not alone. Sextortion is happening to people of all ages and help is available.
- If you need help now or you need to talk about a situation you were in like this, you can go to <https://report.cybertip.org/> and there's a phone number too: **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 24 hours a day at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)** to get help.
- Ask other people to not include you in group chats that are mean or waste your time
- When you see someone get bullied or be the target of mean comments, reach out to them to make sure they're okay

- Screenshot the chat



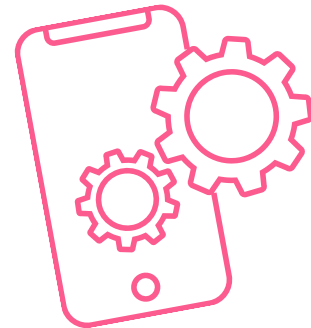
- Report the chat



- Remove yourself from chats that turn into bullying or hate speech, or cross the line of what's appropriate

Settings

Use the safety settings on the phone and the settings built into the app to keep your privacy and stay safe. Visit <https://www.centerforonlinesafety.com/resources> for the latest safety and parental controls settings.



- Location off
- Privacy settings on
- Don't allow strangers to DM you and if you get a DM, report/block/delete

Hard conversations - have them in person and avoid misunderstandings

- When you need to have a difficult conversation, try to have it face to face. Don't break up over text. Don't tell someone they hurt your feelings and try to work it out over chat.



Why is face-to-face better for hard conversations?

Here's what you miss when you just get a text or message on a screen:

- Tone
- Body language
- Context
- Facial expressions
- Volume
- Who else is in the room
- The setting for the conversation



Mental health and wellness

- Take time away from social media. Research shows that heavy social media use contributes to a decrease in satisfaction with your life.



You can even tell your friends- “Hey my phone is off from 4-6. I’ll catch up with you at 6.” Blame your parents! “My Mom is doing this thing where she wants us all to take a break from screens from 6-8 at night. Crazy, right? Anyway, I’ll be on my phone at 8.” YOU can set your own hours you’re available.



- Recognize that social media and gaming apps are designed to hook you and make you want to stay on for longer than you intended.
- Start tracking your screen time (Digital Wellness on Android phones or Screen Time on iPhones) or use another time tracker to see where you’re spending your time. Live on purpose and guard that digital reputation!
- Reach out to a trusted adult when you feel depressed, anxious or overwhelmed. **You are never alone.**



Recap for parents and guardians

1. You're the perfect person to help your child - even if you don't understand technology or everything your child or teen is doing online. They need you!
2. Keep doors of opportunity open with this information.
3. Start today with one conversation.



Next step



Join our community to get tips and safety updates on the apps kids are using that you need to know about.

About Lisa Honold



As founder and director of the Center for Online Safety, Lisa is a national speaker on creating intentional relationships and protecting kids online. She works with parents and schools to keep the bad stuff away from kids and to help kids develop a healthy relationship with technology. You can invite her to speak at your school or organization with this link.

