

TALKING WITH YOUR TEEN ABOUT **RECOGNIZING** AN UNHEALTHY ONLINE RELATIONSHIP



DID YOU KNOW APPROXIMATELY
ONE IN FIVE TEENS HAVE
EXPERIENCED ONLINE DATING ABUSE?

YOU CAN HELP YOUR TEENS LEARN HOW TO
IDENTIFY UNHEALTHY ONLINE BEHAVIOUR

Not all abusive relationships are physically violent. Things like scaring someone, making them feel bad about themselves, or cutting them off from friends and family are still abuse. Often the actions are private, but in some cases the abusive partner may use an audience to make things worse. When it happens online, it takes the form of emotional abuse and it can be especially damaging.

Abusive online relationships are usually part of abusive offline relationships, but the harm of online abuse is different:

- It's easier to gang up on someone: people may not realize the harm an online comment can cause—they may even find it funny. And the more comments there are, the more the harm is amplified.
- Online anonymity makes it difficult to know who is participating in the abuse, and who your teen can trust or turn to (even friends and acquaintances can hide behind aliases).
- The abuse lives permanently online and can be viewed by many people, re-victimizing each time.
- And there is no escape for the victims because their devices are also used for positive social interactions with friends and family.

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YOUR TEEN MIGHT BE IN AN ONLINE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP IF SOMEONE IS:

- Keeping tabs on them, spying on them or stalking them online
- Making them share passwords and/or other confidential information
- Making them 'unfriend' people
- Starting rumours or embarrassing them publicly online
- Pressuring them for sexual photos or sending unwanted sexual photos
- Sharing private photos or videos of your teen without permission
- Impersonating your teen online in a way that alienates or harms them
- Sending messages or texts that make them feel uncomfortable, threatened or afraid

HERE ARE SIGNS YOU CAN LOOK FOR IN YOUR TEEN'S BEHAVIOUR

ARE THEY:

- Isolating themselves from family and friends?
- Exhibiting lower self-confidence or self-esteem?
- Seeming angry, upset or depressed after using their phone or social media?
- Avoiding conversations about their relationship?

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR TEENS ABOUT UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

- Talk to your child about what a healthy relationship looks like. Start the conversation early and keep it going so they know they can come to you or another trusted adult if they feel unsafe.
- Teach them the characteristics of an unhealthy relationship such as control, isolation, harassment or humiliation.
- Talk about the pressure to do things they don't want to do—like taking or sharing explicit photos.
- Teach them how to take screenshots of their interactions (takeascreenshot.org) in case the other person later deletes them.
- Resist the urge to monitor everything your teen does online, but be familiar with what they're watching, playing and listening to, and be ready to talk about gender stereotypes and the ways that romantic relationships are depicted. Surveillance is no substitute for an open and ongoing conversation!

NOT ALL ABUSIVE ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS ARE WITH PEOPLE TEENS KNOW IN REAL LIFE

Online exploitation happens when someone targets teens online to involve them in relationships they're not ready for, either because the teen is below the age of consent or because they are significantly younger than the exploiter. Most people who target teens online don't use aliases, and don't hide their intentions. They target mostly girls in their early teens, as well as boys who are or think they may be gay or bisexual, and shower them with attention, sympathy, affection and kindness to persuade them that they love and understand them. These are tactics to lure them away from friends and family and isolate them, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation

IF YOUR TEEN IS IN AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP:

Be Supportive The most important thing you can do is offer your non-judgmental support. Don't blame them. Listen to what they say. Let them know that the abuse is not their fault and that they deserve to be treated with respect.

Voice Your Concerns Be open about your concerns. Take their responses seriously. Make sure your teen knows you're on their side, and don't suggest that they stop using their phone or social media—they will likely see this as a threat.

Explore Options Don't try to push them into leaving. Instead, try to break their isolation by encouraging them to spend more time with family and friends. You can also talk to your teen's friends to see if they have similar concerns.

Encourage Healthy Communication Talk with them about boundaries and good communication, like not posting or replying to something in anger, but instead walking away from the situation until they've cooled down.

Use Resources In some cases you may want to seek professional help for your teen. Having someone to talk to, like a school counsellor, a private therapist or an anonymous help line like www.kidshelpphone.ca (1-800-668-6868), can provide a positive source of support in a difficult relationship.

For additional resources on online safety, visit www.mediasmarts.ca.