

MENTAL HEALTH TIDBIT (BETTER INFORMED TOGETHER)

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT ONLINE FRIENDSHIPS

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/A/DP
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It is important to know when to begin having discussions with your child about online friendships and help them to identify risky online interactions. It is also important to know how to cut things off if needed. Whether they are using a parent or a friend's phone or playing video games with an option for online play, children may encounter strangers online. It is normal for children to want to interact with groups through activities like gaming online. In this edition of MH TidBIT, we want to show you how you can talk to your children about online friendships and interactions before they encounter a risky situation. We discuss what to expect from your children in speaking to them about these topics as well as some sample scripts of conversations.

What to expect from you children

Ideally, these conversations would start in a child's preteen years. During these years, children are typically more forthcoming and willing to share. Regardless of what age you are having this conversation or how forthcoming your child is, you should balance the conversation with positives and negatives about online interactions. Make sure to incorporate the need for them to talk to an adult if something makes them uncomfortable.

How to have a conversation with your children

The following are some sample guides and scripts. The article that this TidBIT is excerpted from, and linked at the bottom of the page, has additional conversation starters and scripts if you are looking for additional resources.

Sample Script #1

Parent: Has anyone tried to chat with you online or in one of your games?

Child: Someone sent me a message once, but I did not understand it, so I kept playing.

Parent: Why might people want to chat with each other during games?

Child: To make friends and ask questions about the game.

Parent: That sounds like fun. Do you think it is safe to talk to anyone that talks to you online.

Child: I guess so.

Parent: Well, there are nice people online and some people that are not nice or hurt other people. It can be hard to tell the difference when you are just chatting online. People might not always tell the truth about who they are.

Child: Like bad guys?

Parent: Kind of. It can be hard to know who someone is online without knowing them in person first. It is important to know that you never share information or pictures with someone you do not know in person. My goal is to always keep you safe, healthy, and feeling comfortable whether you are online or not. Tell me if anyone makes you uncomfortable, scares you, or tries to ask you any of these questions. Remember, this should not happen even if you know that person in real life. Know that you can always come to me no matter what.

Sample Script #2

Parent: What is the difference between a safe online friend and an unsafe one?

Child: I do not know.

Parent: Do you think people always tell the truth about who they are online?

Child: I guess so or maybe they pretend sometimes.

Parent: That is right. Sometimes people pretend. They can pretend to be silly and have fun, or for bad reasons. They can do it to trick someone or hide something. This is what makes online friendships complicated. It is hard to really know who someone is without knowing them in person.

Child: Okay

Parent: Safe online friends never pressure you to do something you do not want to or make you feel uncomfortable or scared. Has anyone ever made you feel uncomfortable online?

Child: I do not think so.

Parent: Unsafe people may try to get you to join in a private conversation instead of staying in the group, they may ask you for private information, or may try to pressure you to do something that makes you uncomfortable. If they ask if you are alone or for your phone number, address, what school you go to, or to send a picture, these are not good people. These may be "red flags" which are like little warning signs that signal to us that something is off or unsafe. My goal is for you to have fun online and to keep you safe and feeling comfortable online. Tell me if anyone makes you uncomfortable, scares you, or tries to ask you any of those questions. Know that you can come to me no matter what.

Excerpted from: <https://parents.thorn.org/guides/making-friends-online-safely/>