

Internet Safety During COVID

For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities



Connection

COVID-19 has changed the way that most people use the internet and interact with the world. Technology has become more important than ever before for connection. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities may need support to access the internet safely.

While we are spending more time at home to stay healthy, many people are very bored! There are so many ways to use the internet that can fight boredom, including support groups, activities, and meet-up groups. There are computer games, books, audio books, movies, videos, and podcasts to enjoy. You might even be video calling your relatives and friends to stay in touch. It's normal to seek entertainment and escape from the difficulty of being home all of the time.

If you are concerned that your loved one is spending too much time online, consider what needs they are fulfilling online. Are there offline ways to meet those needs? It's possible that there are not, due to COVID-19. It is also possible to find some alternatives to online activities that can meet those same needs of escapism, learning, entertainment, and connection. Time spent online is not inherently worse than time spent offline.

Risk

The internet is a fantastic place to learn new things, but there are also risks of scams and false information, harassment, extremist values, and exploitation. We are all better prepared to combat harmful or false information if we have people in our lives that we trust. The first step to navigating the internet safely is building trusting, meaningful relationships offline.

Scams:

Think about the types of scams that you see online. How do you know it's a scam? Try showing examples of phishing emails or fake news to your loved one and explain how you know it's not real.

Ex. Emails requesting bank information to win a contest, pop-ups telling you your computer has a virus, emails asking for passwords, fake emails from credit card companies, fake social media profile, bots, spammers, and trolls.

False Information:

Discuss what news sources you trust and why. Explain why it's important to find multiple, credible reports about something before you believe it.

Ex. Reading news sites instead of social media, reading multiple news sites, parody websites, how to use Snopes, FactCheck.org, or other fact-checking sites

Harassment:

Talk to the person about safety tools, like blocking, reporting, unfollowing, etc. Share your boundaries and come up with some together about when you might block someone.

Ex. What is the difference between a disagreement and bullying? You don't owe someone an explanation for your existence or opinions online. Taking a break is often a good option.

Extremism:

Talk about your values and what things are not okay to say about other people. If your loved one begins to follow people on social media with harmful views, provide alternatives, talk about why those views hurt people.

Some groups target people who are lonely or feel discarded by society. Those groups might blame those problems on a different group of marginalized people, often women or a racial, ethnic, or religious minority.

How to Spot a Fake Profile:

1. Does the account have a profile photo?
2. Does the profile name seem legitimate? Common but unfamiliar names can be a sign of a fake profile.
3. Is the account more than just a few months old?
4. Does the account have more than a couple dozen friends or followers?
5. Is the account creating a range of different content?
6. Does the message sent to you make sense?
7. Are you already friends with the person?

It's important to have frequent discussions about people who are different from you and show positive examples of marginalized people. Sheltering people with disabilities from discussions about racism, sexism, ableism, etc., does not erase their experiences with these prejudices and it may make them more vulnerable to people who would turn them against other marginalized groups.

Exploitation:

Make sure that the individual understands what information should be public and private online. Everything online could become public, but email is more private than a social media post. Talk about your boundaries for sharing private information on the internet, even with friends or family. If the person has online friends, talk to about what steps they are taking to stay safe. Use the precautions we all use when meeting people online: try to verify the other person's identity, don't share too much personal information, and if you meet up, do so in public, with a friend or family member.

People who are looking for romantic relationships online are also at risk for exploitation. Sometimes it is a beautiful woman asking for money, or someone pretending to be a beautiful woman asking for money. Another common form of exploitation is to ask for nude pictures and then blackmail the person. When looking for romantic or sexual relationships online, take extra care to make sure the person is trustworthy. The heartbreak of being betrayed by someone you loved is particularly awful.

Privacy

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities also deserve privacy online. Privacy might look a bit different for people with disabilities. It is appropriate to follow the public social media accounts of a person with a disability. However, reading their private messages or emails without their knowledge or permission is a violation of that person's privacy and trust. If you have concerns about bullying, scams, etc., talk with your loved one. Some people are grateful for help or may want to share an account. Other people value their privacy and that should be respected. Especially during COVID-19, when people often have less time away from family members, online spaces may provide much needed privacy and independence.