

ONLINE SAFETY

Child-luring, cyber bullying, human trafficking, child pornography - just reading these words can make our skin crawl and spike fear into the very depths of our soul. Combine this with our already present anxiousness with all the hours our children are online with at home learning, video games and social media, it is no wonder we are stressing about our children and their safety online.

It is overwhelming and seems impossible to stay on top of the trends and ever changing technology. New web sites and advanced apps are emerging every day. Predators are zealous and creative in finding new ways to connect with and manipulate young people.

What are parents and caregivers to do? As a parent of four children, I have the same concerns and fears as you. In my research, I have found that [protectkidsonline.ca](https://www.protectkidsonline.ca) is your go-to resource for emerging issues, worrisome technology trends, and how to report cyber crime. Another excellent resource is the [Children, Youth, and Families Addiction and Mental Health site](https://www.cyfcaregivereducation.ca) (www.cyfcaregivereducation.ca). In fact, there is Zoom training titled **Technology & the Teenage Brain: Digital Wellness for Families** on **Tuesday June 8/ 21 6pm-7:30pm**. Go to <https://www.cyfcaregivereducation.ca/virtual-education> to register.

PROACTIVE STRATEGIES TO HELP KEEP CHILDREN SAFE

The best way to protect children online is to start talking to them when they are young and keep an **open dialogue** with them as they grow. Talk to them about the dangers of the internet, the same way you talk to them about crossing the street safely and speaking to strangers. If you start young, it won't seem as awkward when they are older. Always reassure them that they can come to you when they need help, **NO MATTER WHAT**, without worrying about getting into trouble.

- If your children are older, begin that conversation **today**, even if it is uncomfortable. **It is never too late.**
- Equally important is **supervision**. Whenever possible, have your children engage in their online activity in a busy area of the house. **Secrecy is a breeding ground for dangerous habits.**
- **Have a plan with your children** on how they can respond and who to tell if someone online sounds "odd", shares or requests pictures or if something makes them feel weird.

- Be sure your younger children know to always ask your **permission** before they share pictures or video chat with anyone.
- All electronic devices have **control features** that you can put time limits on apps, block sites, music and apps, restrict mature or adult content, etc. If you are unsure how to do this, call your service provider or have a friend help you.

[ProtectKidsOnline.ca](https://www.protectkids.ca) gives further suggestions:

- Be involved in what your child is doing on and off line.
- Set up parental controls: use filtering software and set time limits on the devices your child is on.
- Always supervise young children when they are online. Having parental controls on a device does not guarantee complete safe viewing. Supervision is still key.
- Have regular conversations with your child about healthy relationships and healthy sexuality to help them make sense of media messages.
- Talk opening and honestly about the hidden messages in media such as gender stereotypes, glorification of violence, power and control.
- Know your child's username and passwords.

Let's face it, we are all spending A LOT of time online these days, not just children. It is a struggle to keep our lives balanced with our online work and responsibilities and other tasks that don't require a screen. With the return of warm weather, longer days and more choices of outdoor activities, we can all benefit from powering off our devices and getting some fresh air to work and play and have fun together.

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She is a support for schools, students, parents and caregivers to encourage success in school. Tammy advocates for students and provides a link between the student and other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for more than 20 years and is a mother to 4 teenagers.