



**ACT**  
Government

# Developing personal safety skills for young people

## A Guide for Parents



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# Developing personal safety skills for young people

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# Foreword

This booklet provides key information and strategies for parents, carers and guardians to promote personal safety for their young person. Drawing on the concepts of the Protective Behaviours program, this information can empower parents to deal with difficult, unsafe or abusive situations their young person may be facing. This booklet aims to inform parents about how to help young people to develop skills to keep themselves safer. We want to promote help seeking behaviours so that young people are able to talk to a safe trusted person about anything in their lives.

We want young people to be able to speak up and speak out about their safety, because the sooner the disclosures occur, the sooner help can be put in place. We also want them to be able to identify other 'safe' people in their lives, whether at home, at school or in the community. In building their confidence to learn about personal safety and situations that young people may find themselves in, they are more likely to tell someone when they themselves are worried, scared or unsafe.

We know that sexual abuse happens across all ages, genders, races and cultures. There are things we can all do to prevent abuse from happening. Research tells us that it is more likely that young people will be abused by someone they know rather than by a stranger. Young people with disabilities and those from Indigenous backgrounds are at greater risk and are overrepresented in the data.

Preventing abuse of our young people is a community responsibility, and all adults have a part to play in acting protectively. We want young people to know their rights and responsibilities, to understand personal safety concepts and to build their skills. Education, prevention, and ongoing support are vital components in building a safer community.



# 1. Why teach personal safety?

Personal safety is the ability for an individual to develop skills to respond to situations and to keep themselves safe. There has been an increased awareness of issues of personal safety, particularly in the media, and in relation to online safety. As parents, you would have already talked with your children about water safety, road safety, fire safety and being safe online, so let's extend the conversation to personal safety.

Some young people find it hard to speak out about personal safety. It is important to reinforce that they can talk about anything no matter what it is, and to understand that they have an adult's permission to talk about any issues they may face. We want young people to connect with others, build their confidence in sharing what is happening in their lives and communicate when they are feeling unsafe, worried, scared, bullied or pressured. Young people need reassurance that an adult will listen, believe them, and take action to keep them safe.

As parents we want to find the right **balance** between giving young people the freedom they strive for, including the ability to make choices about their lives, and having appropriate rules which can keep them safer.

Our young people are constantly learning about the risks they face in their world in person and online. Young people have to make a lot of difficult decisions including talking through issues facing them at school, navigating peer pressure, building friendships, tackling bullying, staying safe online and building healthy relationships. This is a unique time when they are developing their identity as they are becoming more independent and exploring their environment. Despite this time of exploration and growth, young people still need protection and to be kept safe.

As parents, it is important to share your family values and model safe behaviours. Parents are in a unique position to help their young person recognise their strengths, talk about their changing bodies, and identify their feelings including feeling safe. Regular conversations can help establish strong and open communication throughout adolescence.

Before talking with your young person, first consider the messages you want to share with them. It is often a good idea to start conversations early about personal safety issues, rather than to wait for them to ask questions, or for them to get all their ideas from other young people or online. Knowledge and skills about safety can be adapted and built on as needed. We can help young people to understand about the importance of healthy and safe relationships, and how this can fit into the broader context in our society.

Helping to build your young person's personal safety skills is invaluable.



## 2. How to talk about personal safety

Open communication with your young person is a vital element to help keep them safe. Young people need adults to understand and appreciate their perspective, and to provide safety through firm limits and clear expectations.

Communication with young people can be challenging, and it takes sensitivity, time, and energy. The goal of open communication is to strengthen your relationship through communication. This means taking the time to listen and understand what they have to say.

**Be approachable**  
**Give them your full attention**  
**Let them know you are interested and prepared to listen**

Sometimes communication can happen while in a car, or when you are doing an activity together such as going for a walk, cooking, playing sport, and not necessarily when sitting down at home for a 'talk'. Manage your reactions so your young person knows they can talk to you and trust you to respond appropriately without feeling judged. Let your young person know that **they can talk with you about anything no matter what it is**. Have smaller conversations often. Remember, conversations about personal safety are not one-offs. Young people need to feel heard, understood, valued and validated. They do not need you to go straight to problem solving. Listening and staying connected is more important.

Teach your young person to be able to talk about their feelings and experiences with you. Sometimes it can be useful to share your own experience including how you handled difficult situations. You can do this by initiating conversations about building healthy relationships, creating boundaries, and by answering questions accurately and respectfully. By handling disclosures calmly and reassuringly, you send the message that you are someone your young person (or other young people you care about) can talk to, even when something has already happened.

### Some tips for talking to young people:

- > Check in regularly about their world and what is happening
- > Understand their style of communicating with you
- > Know their interests, friends and passions
- > Ask open-ended questions and listen nonjudgmentally and respectfully
- > Be patient and give them space
- > Listen more than you speak
- > Use the language of safety e.g. "How safe do you feel when...?"
- > Be sensitive about what is important to each of you.



### 3. Adolescence and the brain

Parents are important partners in building personal safety with their young people. In order to help develop these skills, it is important for parents to understand what is happening for their young person developmentally as they enter adolescence. The timing of adolescence varies widely, and the rate of maturity varies across genders and individuals. During this period young people experience changes in their emotional, social, physical and cognitive development that can influence how they interpret and view their world. It is a time for learning about the links between their thoughts, feelings and situations.

A young person's rapidly changing brain is still under construction for many years, becoming fully matured in their mid to late twenties. During this time of development, they have new frameworks for personal safety and decision making. The prefrontal cortex in their brains is undergoing major growth and development. This part of the brain is the last to develop and is responsible for decision-making, judgement, planning, problem solving and

impulse control. Because this area of the brain is still developing, they often rely on their amygdala – the part of the brain that is associated with emotions, impulses, aggression, and instinctive behaviour.

Young people often report they feel like they are on an emotional rollercoaster. Some parents feel like they are on a rollercoaster too. Throughout adolescence young people can become confused about what they are experiencing and take longer to communicate their ideas and feelings. This confusion can be the result of shifting between using their amygdala to problem solve, and their lesser developed prefrontal cortex.

During this time, young people are developing their skills in taking responsibility, regulating feelings, delaying gratification, controlling impulses, learning about decision making, and building social skills to assist with developing healthy relationships. Young people are learning how to be an adult and are evaluating how to assess risks although, it is important to remember that these skills are still developing.

Young people can be naturally self-conscious and vulnerable. They need to belong, to be listened to, to be empowered and encouraged to build their resilience. They need strong connections with others. They also need firm boundaries, structure, more privacy and opportunities to connect. Their online behaviour needs to be monitored. For some young people, it can link into their ongoing impulse control issues. Parents need to know what is going on in their lives. They also need support, patience and to understand the changing needs of their young person. Having a good sense of humour can help.



## 4. Risk taking and the safety continuum

Parents need to have regular conversations with their young people about everyone's right to feel safe, as well as their responsibilities to respect the rights of others to feel safe. Young people need to have adults to support them as they are navigating this period of immense change from childhood to adolescence. The goal is to help them learn how to weigh up the safety, risk or danger in a range of situations. Of course, each life experience is unique.

Adolescents can be creative, energetic and challenging at times. They are experiencing changes in all areas of development including physical, behavioural, cognitive, emotional and social areas. The way a young person deals with these changes can vary greatly, and the coping strategies they use vary widely too.

Risk taking is the need for excitement and fun and looking for new experiences. Risk taking can be driven by hormone level changes as well as a tendency for sensation seeking. Some young people can have an increased attraction to new and intense sensations and experiences, despite the risks. Because their prefrontal cortex is still developing, they may act without thinking through the consequences, can appear impulsive and can challenge their parents.

**Young people need a balance of support and challenge.**

An important job as a parent is to allow young people enough experiences for them to learn, while also helping them assess risks, and minimise harm. The rewards that young people gain through risk taking and sensation seeking, sometimes overrides their judgment of risk. You can help them to assess risks by:

- > emphasising the immediate and long-term consequences of actions.
- > talking through decisions step by step, asking about possible courses of action, and talking through potential consequences.
- > encouraging your young person to weigh up positive consequences or rewards against negative ones.

- > teaching problem solving skills including defining problems, listing options, and considering outcomes that everyone is happy with.

### The safety continuum

Another way parents can help young people assess risk is by asking them about where they may fit on the safety continuum. Over time, young people learn to assess risks more realistically as their prefrontal cortex matures.



The safety continuum assesses risk by asking these questions:

- > Is there a time limit?
- > Do they have a choice?
- > Are they experiencing their early warning signs?
- > Does an adult know where they are?
- > Can they get help?

If serious risky behaviour occurs, such as repeated risk taking or placing themselves in unsafe situations, then a referral to a professional could be considered.



## 5. Identifying early warning signs

Early warning signs are physical sensations that serve as indicators that we are at risk or that our risk is increasing. Body signals can vary for each person. Identifying body signals allows us to take appropriate action to improve safety and reduce risk.

A quick body scan can help your young person to notice any feelings or sensations they may be having in their body. This helps young people to identify that they may be in an unsafe situation and may need to act.

So how does a person's body let them know if they are feeling unsafe?

Ask your young person if they get one or more of these early warning signs:

- ✓ heart pounding
- ✓ dry mouth
- ✓ hands perspiring
- ✓ legs trembling
- ✓ feeling frozen
- ✓ butterflies in the stomach
- ✓ feeling sick
- ✓ wanting to go to the toilet

Early warning signs are also known as the fight/flight/freeze response which occurs when our emotional brain (amygdala) is activated. We want our young people to become more aware of the messages that their bodies are sending them about their own safety.

So, what is the first step when your young person notices their early warning signs?

If your young person is experiencing their early warning signs, encourage them to start taking some deep calming breaths. They may need to seek support or use another calming strategy until their early warning signs are gone. We can ask them when they feel safe again.

Remind them that they can talk to someone they trust. It is important to establish their safety. They may need to move away from the risk to help them feel safer before they begin to problem solve.

**Encourage them to breathe and calm their body**

**Encourage them to talk to someone in their personal network**



## 6. Who young people can talk to: developing their personal networks

We want to teach our young people that they are not alone and that they can talk about anything, no matter what it is, with someone they trust. Young people often confide in their immediate family members, the people they live with and those who they have regular contact with. They may also rely heavily on their peers as they need people outside of the family who they can talk to. Many young people are connecting via social media, so networks may also include those online connections. Encourage young people to identify personal support networks of up to four adults in addition to those they live with. Each person should be someone who will listen and **take action** to help the young person feel safe, particularly when they are noticing their early warning signs. People in a teen's network can be used to share good news as well as calls for help. We want young people to **persist** in asking for help until they feel safe. If one adult or friend on their network is not available, encourage young people to talk to another identified safety person on their network until their early warning signs and risks are gone. These help seeking behaviours will keep them feeling connected with others and build a strong base for seeking help in the future.

**Guide young people to find someone who will really listen and to persist in telling until they feel safe again**

It is important for young people to identify other supportive adults outside their home. Sometimes young people are afraid that they will 'get in trouble' if they tell their parents about something that has happened. They may worry that they may not be believed, or feel uncomfortable and can fear being blamed, shamed and embarrassed. This fear can be reinforced by the person who is harming them. Help your young person to realise that there are other adults who can help them if they don't want to talk to their parents about something. Parents can ask "If you don't feel comfortable talking to me about something, who else can you talk to?" or "What if something happens when you are out, who could you talk to?"

The activity of identifying personal networks can help assure young people they are supported and are part of a connected community. It is a good idea to re-think their network if circumstances change or people move away. Some young people may need to connect with their cultural networks, as well as other appropriate support networks for those working through their sexuality or gender identity.

**We want young people to know that it is ok to ask for help**



## 7. What do healthy relationships look like?

We all have the right to feel respected, loved, and free to be ourselves. Relationships involve building **trust** and **acceptance**, mutual **respect** and **equality**. Our young people deserve to be in healthy relationships and parents can help navigate these early relationships.

As a parent, you can help your young person understand what a **healthy relationship** looks and sounds like. In a healthy relationship people feel valued, safe, connected, respected, cared for and that they can have fun together. There is genuineness, affection and each partner can respect their differences. Compromise and negotiation can assist when sorting out differences. Honesty and clear communication are also key. In a healthy relationship people don't try to change or control each other, but accept each other, give each other space and use safe and **respectful language**.

It is also valuable for young people to know what an unhealthy relationship looks and sounds like. An **unhealthy relationship** can seem to be healthy at the start, but then can slowly change over time into one with unhealthy elements. Disrespect can be a feature of an unhealthy relationship. Young people can feel scared, threatened, humiliated and controlled. In an unhealthy relationship some behaviours can include threats, telling lies, keeping track of where they are, who they are with, and controlling what they do, think and feel.

Behaviours of concern can include the following:

**Verbal abuse** is when there is name calling, putdowns and using words to hurt someone.

**Physical abuse** involves physical acts such as hitting, kicking, pushing or hurting someone.

**Sexual abuse** is forcing someone to do anything sexual from kissing to having sex. It involves pressuring someone to do sexual things they don't want to and without their consent. It involves coercion, manipulation and power over someone.

**Emotional abuse** is when a person puts someone down, threatens to hurt themselves or others and can use jealousy or anger to control others.

**It takes time and effort to build great relationships**





**They need to know that if someone crosses their personal boundary and they have said NO it is not their fault**

## 8. Personal boundaries and respect

Parents can have ongoing conversations with their young people about personal boundaries, personal space, and respect. Young people need to have the appropriate language to be able to talk about body boundaries and personal space. A personal **boundary** is like a limit and may vary for different people, for example family, friends and people at school. It is the young person's **choice** about who can come close into their personal or 'me' space and those who can't. It is about the young person giving **permission** for someone to come into their personal boundary or space. Identifying a person's personal boundary is about deciding when someone they trust can give them a kiss, a hug, a high five or a handshake or a nod or a distant wave.

Everyone's boundaries are different, and they are influenced by their family of origin, past experiences, and cultural influences.

The key messages for young people are that different behaviours are appropriate in different settings. Some people can be invited closer over time, after they get to know them better. It is hoped that by talking about personal boundaries, young people will feel more able to talk about issues that may arise and recognise when a **boundary crossing** incident happens.

As a parent of a young person, ask yourself:

- > What do they already know about body boundaries?
- > Does your young person respect others body boundaries?
- > Do they understand the difference between 'public' and 'private' e.g. public and private behaviours and places?
- > Are they respectful online?
- > Would they tell you or someone on their personal network if someone crossed their body boundary?
- > What do they already know about consent?
- > Do they know that your family does not keep secrets about touching?

## 9. Consent, coercion and the law

Our young people need to know about the importance of consent, respect and safety. It is a complex process, and the conversation needs to be ongoing. Giving **consent** means saying **YES**. It is about having **respect** for themselves and their body boundaries as well as respecting others' choices about their own bodies. Teach your young person that they can say **NO** when it comes to their body.

It is important to know that what might start out as a 'Yes' may become a 'No' and that is okay. Sometimes another person may be upset if the person has changed their mind, but the young person still decides as it is their body and it is their right.

When a young person doesn't want to participate in a sexual activity and they do not give consent, it is considered to be an **assault** and is **against the law**.

This information is useful to know for yourself and to support a young person when talking about these important topics. So, what is the difference between consent, coercion and the law in relation to sex?

- > **Consent** must be free and voluntary. Consent cannot be given if the person is intoxicated, asleep or not aware of what is happening. If the person withdraws consent it is against the law to continue.
- > **Coercion** is when someone is pressured into an unwanted sexual activity. It can involve physical force, or threats and emotional manipulation.

**If it is not an explicit Yes... then it is a NO**

If your young person is unsure whether it is consent or coercion, they could talk to someone on their identified network, contact a helpline or seek online information and support.

Sometimes young people worry about how talking about these issues might impact their family or friends and other people they know. It takes **courage to speak out** and **persistence** to be heard. We want our young people to have a voice and to be heard.

**Ask, Listen, Observe and Act**

### The Law

It is an offence in the ACT for an adult to have sex with someone who is **under 16 years of age**, even if they agree, as the law states that he/she **cannot legally consent**. The person can be charged with a serious criminal offence, jailed and placed on the sex offender register.

**No Means No**

## 10. How to teach refusal skills

It is important to teach your young person that sometimes they will need to say “**No**” in order to stay safe, before telling a trusted friend or adult. Learning how to say no means teaching your young person **refusal skills**. It can be hard for your young person to say no to someone they care about. It can take time to learn these refusal skills. They require practise and building their confidence. It involves resisting pressure whilst maintaining self-respect.

Saying **NO** requires confidence, practice and even role rehearsals. The more that young people practice being assertive and confident, the more their experiences will lead them to staying safer. Young people can be more vulnerable if it is harder for them to say no to unwanted touching.

Young people have many social pressures and may make decisions they later regret or feel uncomfortable about. If your young person is in a group, sometimes they may feel pressured into doing or saying things that they would not normally do if alone. Alternatively, they may get strength from others to help refuse requests. Ask your young person who might be supportive and help them to refuse requests.

Sometimes an assertive ‘**NO**’ needs to be accompanied by strong body language such as arms crossed and hands-off gestures. Using a strong body posture, having a serious expression and using a firm tone of voice can also accompany the ‘**NO**’.

Other ways to refuse:

- > distract with humour and make a joke
- > make up a reason, fact or an excuse
- > repeat yourself
- > walk away if possible.

Many young people have a **code word** with their parents or friends to help them get out of a risky situation. Saying ‘My mother/ father won’t let me’ is a good excuse. We want our young people to be able to say ‘**No**’ to unwanted touches or when in risky situations. We know that **it is never the young person’s fault if someone touches them** and they feel unsafe. They may have tried to say no and may not have been in a position to keep themselves safe.

When refusing an unwanted touch, young people could say:

- > ‘I like you but I’m not ready.’
- > ‘I don’t want to.’
- > “Stop it.’
- > ‘You’re hurting me.’

Parents of young people with a disability may require additional strategies, including repetition, role plays and rehearsals, and a safety plan to keep them safer.

**Remind your young person to keep telling until someone hears and believes them**



## 11. What is sexual abuse?

- > Sexual abuse is also known as sexual assault. Sexual abuse and sexual assault are about exerting power and control over someone.
- > It refers to any unwanted sexual contact by another person, whatever their gender.
- > It happens to all genders, and while more females are represented in the data, the real number for males is likely to be underreported.
- > It often involves feelings of shame, embarrassment, fear, self-blame and secrecy.
- > It involves a range of inappropriate touching.
- > It can involve having someone showing a person explicit images or asking them to send them nude pictures.
- > It can involve being forced to engage in sexual behaviour with another person without their consent and before they are old enough to give consent.
- > It can occur at school, at work or in various social situations, and it often occurs in the home.

Some abusers can pose as a young person online to try to connect with your young person and be their 'friend'. This can occur through a variety of platforms such as social media, online forums and through gaming. This process is how some **adults or older youth** attempt to gain the trust of young people, with the intention of sexually harming or abusing them.

We want to teach young people that if it doesn't feel right being around someone, then they need to trust their instincts, or that 'uh oh' feeling they get, **speak up** and seek help from someone on their personal network.

**It takes a lot of courage to speak out and have a voice.** Many young people are silenced and do not speak up until many years later, as they don't think that they will be heard and believed. The earlier we can recognise the signs, and the earlier a young person discloses, the sooner steps can be taken to **act protectively** to keep them safer.

**It is important to reassure your young person that it is never their fault if they are caught up in an unwanted sexual activity, and they are not to blame**

## 12. What is grooming?

As a parent of a young person, it is important to understand the process of grooming, and to be aware of the signs. Parents need to know what it is and how young people might get caught up in it. While most adults and other young people in our community are trustworthy, some may try to gain power over a young person to manipulate them into engaging in sexual activity. It is often a subtle but deliberate process. It can be difficult to think and believe that a person who grooms may be someone we know or someone who is trusted by the community.

Some **types of grooming behaviours** are:

- > Someone showing an unusual interest in a young person and creating a special friendship in person or online.
- > Isolating a child or young person from protective adults and spending an unusual amount of time with them.
- > Someone testing the boundaries or breaking body rules such as crossing body boundaries, tickling, touching or hugging.
- > An adult who invades a young person's personal space such as in the bathroom or when getting changed.
- > Someone who gradually sexualises a relationship with a young person, for example, makes sexual jokes, takes sexual photos or shows a young person sexual material.
- > Someone making a young person responsible for keeping secrets, by using threats, tricks, coercion, bribes and other types of persuasion.
- > Telling the young person that their parents won't believe them.

**Tactics** from those who groom can include the following:

- > Shame: making the young person feel bad about themselves.
- > Tricks: misleading someone for example, saying all young people watch this stuff, take this, do these things, or this will make you popular.
- > Lies: saying everyone does it.
- > Blackmail: threatening the young person or embarrassing them.

- > Bribes: giving presents, drinks or offering alcohol, substances, or money.
- > Guilt: through making the young person feel that it is their fault.

**Notice** any changes in your young person and whether they appear unhappy or anxious or are avoiding a particular adult or older teenager.

**Adults need to be protective and also watch other adults**

As adults, the sooner we recognise potentially harmful situations the better protected our young people are. Parents should remain alert to the signs that something is not right and be aware of changes in their young person's behaviour.

Remember that if someone appears too good to be true, they usually are. Let your young person know that you are concerned and aware of the dangers young people face, and that you can talk about anything, no matter what it is.



## 13. Managing a disclosure

There may be times when your young person discloses something about their personal safety or something about another person's personal safety. It is not easy to know how to respond because as an adult, you may have feelings of shock, guilt, shame, anger, sadness and disbelief.

While it can be challenging, the **first step** is to stay calm and manage your feelings. Managing your response includes first taking some deep breaths, then being aware of your facial expression, tone of voice, volume and your body language. This will reassure and support the young person that they have done the **right thing in telling**. It may also help them to trust that they can tell you other things now, or in the future. Thank them for telling you, let them know you believe them and respond calmly. Comfort and reassure them and always err on the side of connection.

**Stay calm, show support and listen**

As well as being supportive when they disclose, help create a calm and safe space for your young person after they have told you. Remember, it takes courage to speak out. They are relying on you as the adult to keep them safe and to help stop what is happening.

**The way a disclosure is managed is important to the long-term emotional wellbeing of your young person and your relationship with them.**

Young people need to know that you will believe them, and they need to know how you are going to act. Unless it is an emergency situation, the first step is likely to be getting some advice about how to support them immediately after a disclosure has occurred. Parents may need to seek help from professionals, so they know how to best respond and provide ongoing support. Also ask your young person what their thoughts are, and about what they need to feel safe again.

You can provide a supportive response to your young person by understanding that:

- > When a person discloses that they have been abused, they may be feeling scared, guilty, ashamed, angry and powerless.
- > A person rarely lies about sexual abuse.
- > Their disclosure is a message that they want the abuse to stop.
- > Establishing their safety is important.
- > Your young person needs to know what you plan to do next to keep them safe.

**Be the adult your young person needs and provide a safe space to talk**

Remember that sometimes, young people may want to protect their parents from personal pain or will check out whether their parent can manage hearing a similar story before sharing their own story. They may only reveal a part of the story until they feel heard and safe enough to reveal all the details. Seek your own support too, as it can be hard to hear that your young person has experienced abuse.

**Remember it is never too late to tell**

## 14. Staying safe online

Information that young people have access to must be age and developmentally appropriate. There should be clear rules for young people and ongoing conversations about how to be safe online. Parents can have discussions about family expectations of appropriate online behaviour.

Some risks to young people include harmful material, exposure to harmful sites, sexual exploitation and bullying. Online bullying includes making threats, spreading rumours, excluding someone and sharing sexts, selfies or nude images.

It is important that young people are made aware of online risks, including grooming, identity theft and scams. They need to understand the importance of not sharing personal information as it can quickly become public. Help your young person to understand how their current actions can leave a lifelong digital footprint.

Any discussion about risks can be coupled with a discussion about what to do if your young person feels unsafe online or see images that give them their early warning signs. They also need to know who to talk to. Many young people are concerned that their device will be removed if they tell, so they may be reluctant to share what they have seen.

With strong relationships and open lines of communication with trusted people on their network, young people will feel more comfortable to seek help if an online problem arises.

Some **tips** for promoting safe online activity are:

- > Remind young people not to give out private information online such as their name, age, address, phone number, school, sports club information or credit card details.
- > Set limits about online use and encourage your young person to stay in a public space when online at home.
- > Encourage your young person to talk about what they do online, whether it is with you, or a trusted adult on their personal safety network.
- > Remind them that it's okay to make mistakes online and learn from them.

- > Discuss what cyberbullying is and talk about different types of strangers online.
- > Consider an online cyber agreement with your young person.
- > Encourage them to stand up for their friends online.
- > Remind them to never agree to meet in person someone that they have connected with online.
- > Encourage young people to question what they see online and practice 'What ifs?' for different online scenarios.



## 15. Responding to harmful material

Young people are at high risk of seeing something harmful online, or on someone else's device. What can they do if they see harmful material or see something that is concerning?

As a parent, it can be difficult knowing how to respond when this happens. Exposure to pornography and graphic violence can have a lasting impact on young persons' relationships, and create unrealistic expectations of themselves and others.

Research shows that during adolescence a young person's brain can be altered by continually seeing harmful material, and there are increased concerns about them potentially developing mental health issues including depression, addiction and anxiety. What young people see online may also be harmful to their self-esteem. If they see something upsetting or that they don't like, or is keeping them awake at night, encourage your young person to tell you, or someone on their support network, and seek help.

Create an environment for open discussion with your teenager. Know what apps your young person is using. We need to give them some **context** when they see harmful material and not focus on feelings of **shame**.

Young people can be curious about what they see and can get hooked into wanting to see more. Parental controls and passwords for Wi-Fi on devices, can be a safeguarding practice, just like adults putting in place a safety fence around a pool.

**Indicators** that your young person may be watching harmful material:

- > Being more secretive about their online behaviour
- > Changes to their sleep, appetite or behaviour
- > Withdrawing from their usual preferred activities
- > Using more sexualised language
- > Appearing addicted to being online all of the time
- > Receiving unexplained gifts e.g., e-vouchers
- > Becoming more moody when asked to get off their device.

Through regular conversations we can help young people to develop a critical lens in relation to what they see, and we can help them to question the images that they are exposed to. Remember, you or your young person can report harmful online material to the office of the eSafety Commissioner.

If you are feeling concerned about your young person's behaviour, a referral to a professional is recommended to assist in providing supportive strategies.

**Let your young person know that it is ok to seek support when online**

## 16. Family safety plans

It is useful to come up with some rules with your young person to try to prevent unsafe situations occurring. Involving your young person in this process is important and helps them to understand your family's expectations around their behaviour. It is important that you have shared your family values with your young person and let them know that you will listen non-judgmentally if they want to share something with you.

Encourage your young person to:

- > Go out in a group and look out for each other.
- > Have a mobile phone charged and with them at all times.
- > Discuss what time they are coming home and how.
- > Know how to make an emergency call and how to get help.
- > Consider the safe adults or friends to contact if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- > Let an adult know where they are and update them if plans change.
- > If using headphones when out, keep the sound low and be aware of their surroundings.

- > Stay away from alcohol or drugs and do not get into a car with a driver who has been drinking.
- > Use their parents as an excuse if they need to get out of an unsafe situation.
- > Have a family or friend code word that they can use so they can alert someone if not feeling safe such as butterfly, sun, cloud, key.

Practice **'What If'** scenarios when they are out to prepare for a risky or uncomfortable situation. Some examples are:

- > What if you were going to a party and the parents went out?
- > What if a stranger you met online offered to meet up with you and wanted it to be kept a secret?
- > What if someone asks you to share an explicit photo of you?
- > What if someone wanted to show you pornography?
- > What if someone offered you alcohol or drugs? What could you do?
- > What if someone touched you inappropriately or pressured you?



## 17. Resources for parents

You may need your own support at different times to help navigate your young person's journey. Think about who is on your own personal network, such as family members, friends, and colleagues. Key contacts at school include home room teachers, year coordinators, executive teachers, the school's Wellbeing Team and the school psychologist. There are also a range of health professionals and community organisations to contact for support.

**Beyond Blue** provides support services for depression and anxiety. **Call 1300 22 4636.**

**Child Youth Protection Service (CYPS)** is where you report abuse in the ACT. Call 1300 556 729 (general persons line) and for information about the indicators and information about the different types of abuse and family violence.

**Child At Risk Health Unit (CARHU)** is based at the Canberra Hospital and provides examinations, education, consultation and therapy for children and their families/carers where there are concerns of child abuse and/or neglect. Call 6244 2712.

**eHeadspace** provides free online and telephone support and counselling to young people aged 12 to 25 and their families and friends.

**Kids Helpline** is a free 24 hour telephone counselling service for children and young people aged between 5 and 25 years who will listen and support you. Call 1800 55 1800.

**Lifeline** is a free 24 hour telephone crisis support service. Call 13 11 44.

**Parentline** is a free telephone counselling service to parents and carers offered between 9am and 5pm. Call to discuss any issue regarding bringing up children and family relationships on 6287 3833 or 1300 1300 52 if calling from NSW.

**Police can be called using 000** if you are in immediate danger. If you suspect your young person is being groomed or there are sexual offences, call 13 14 44.

**The Office of the eSafety Commissioner** is committed to empowering all Australians to have safer, more positive experiences online. For information and programs for parents as well as for reporting, including reporting serious cyberbullying visit **[esafety.gov.au](https://esafety.gov.au)**

**ThinkUKnow** is a cybersafety program. It is a partnership between the Australian Federal Police, Commonwealth Bank, Microsoft and Datacom. For resources and information see: **[www.thinkuknow.org.au](https://www.thinkuknow.org.au)**

**1800 RESPECT.org.au** is a confidential information, counselling and support service.

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