



## Sexual Health Resource Toolkit for Parents and Caregivers of Youth with IDD

# Keep Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Safe Online

*Safe internet use equals knowledge and skills to cautiously navigate digital spaces such as email, direct messaging, websites, social media, online dating apps, chat rooms, and cell phones.*

### Safe Internet Use Can Provide Positive Online Experiences

The internet can connect people all over the world who share similar life experiences. It can help youth create a sense of community for themselves, for example, by connecting with others who have a similar developmental disability.

Like all youth, many youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities access the internet through multiple devices in the home and at school.<sup>1</sup> Communicating online or by text gives youth with IDD more control over:

*"I really love the idea that social media can be an asset for my kids."*

Parent of youth with IDD



- The pace of conversations
- Additional ways to communicate nonverbally
- Communication without having to rely on face-to-face social cues<sup>2</sup>

Learning how to use the internet safely can guide youth to positive experiences online!

*Used safely, the internet can be a great place for youth to connect with other people, learn new information, and access entertainment. Parents and caregivers can help make this happen!*

## Tips to Help Youth Learn to Stay Safe on the Internet

Now that we know how online communication can be a positive experience for youth with IDD, let's talk about how you can help create an environment for a healthy online community by working with your youth as a TEAM:

### Teach

- Your youth not to overshare.<sup>3</sup> Explain that it is not safe to share personal information like their address or last name with someone they have never met in person.
- Your youth what "red-flag feelings" are, such as when something online makes them uncomfortable or upset. However, be aware that some youth with IDD might have a hard time identifying a red-flag feeling. Red-flag feelings are a warning sign of potential danger. For example, a request to meet secretly or to share pictures of themselves partially clothed (or worse—unclothed) should cause a red-flag feeling. Encourage your youth to discuss these feelings with you or another trusted adult.

*"My kid has a hard time distinguishing feelings so I ask if he has 'funny tummy feelings' to understand if he might feel uncomfortable."*

-Parent of youth with IDD

- Your youth to think about how they present themselves online. Remind them that pictures and social media posts can be difficult to delete, especially if other people reshare the content on their social media feeds. Remind them it's also important to be respectful of other people, like their friends, when posting on social media.

### Explore Together

- Best practices for internet safety. This can be fun! For example, try out [Interland](#), an online game to help explore why and how to set internet boundaries. You can also ask your youth to show you what they've learned or know about the internet. You might learn something from them!
- A shared list of family internet rules and displaying it in a common space, such as the door of your refrigerator or by a shared computer. For example, not letting your youth use the internet or phones at night. There are other examples available online, such as the [Family Media Agreement](#) developed by Common Sense Media.

### Awareness of Common Issues

- Be aware of cyberbullying. Youth with disabilities are 1.8 times more likely to be victims of cyberbullying than youth without disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Youth with IDD can be victims of false rumors or insults online. Some have received threats of harm.<sup>5</sup> Youth with IDD also have a higher risk of being prey to sexual solicitation on the internet.<sup>6</sup>
- Know what social media and gaming sites your youth frequents online. This can help you be aware of where they go online and be able to help them avoid negative experiences, since youth with IDD receive less training on social media safety than their peers do.<sup>7</sup> Counteract that with your TEAM.

## Work as a TEAM!

Teach

Explore together

Awareness of common problems

Monitor

## Be sure to see our other snapshots:

- Talking to Your Youth with IDD About Sexual Health and Relationships
- Supporting Youth with IDD through Puberty and Early Adolescence
- The Role of Parents and Caregivers in Preventing and Responding to Abuse

## Monitor

- The websites, social media platforms, and apps your youth uses regularly, which can change often.
- Warning signs that an online predator is targeting your youth. For example, is your youth spending long hours online, especially at night; turning the computer or device off when you walk in the room; withdrawing from family life; or showing a reluctance to discuss online activities?<sup>8</sup>
- Ongoing needs for privacy. It is OK for most youth to have some privacy online. Establish guidelines together about when you will check their digital devices. This helps provide a trusting relationship as youth become more independent.<sup>9</sup>

## Take Action If You Think Your Youth Is at Risk

Talk to youth about what to do if they are bullied online and teach them how to stay safe. For example, they can tell a trusted adult, take screenshots to save evidence, and block the bully. Organizations such as [Young Adults: Disabled and Proud](#) have resources and tips to help.

**Ask your youthren to tell a trusted adult if someone upsets them online.**

Take it seriously if your youth reports uncomfortable exchanges or bullying online or by text. Familiarize yourself with resources such as the reporting line for the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Youth](#) (800.843.5678) in case you have concerns about online relationships and need help.

## Resources:

Click links for more information

- [Stopbullying.gov](#): U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides general tips to keep your youth safe on the internet.
- [Youth Organizing! Disabled and Proud](#): An advocacy group that connects, organizes and educates youth with disabilities.
- [ConnectSafely](#): An organization dedicated to educating people about safety, privacy, and digital wellness.
- [Common Sense Media](#): An organization focused on the digital well-being of youthren and teens, with many resources for parents, caregivers and teachers on internet safety.
- [KidsHealth Internet Safety Guidance](#): Quick tips for parents and caregivers on internet safety.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Alfredsson Ågren, K., A. Kjellberg, and H. Hemmingsson. "Access to and Use of the Internet Among Adolescents and Young Adults with Intellectual Disabilities in Everyday Settings." *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2020, pp. 89–98.
- <sup>2</sup> Alper, Meryl. "Digital Youth with Disabilities." John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> Nesi, Jacqueline. "The Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health." *North Carolina Medical Journal*. vol. 81, no. 2, March 2020, pp. 116–121
- <sup>4</sup> Fuxman, S., S. Kessel Schneider, and M. Heyman. "The Ruderman White Paper on Social Media, Cyberbullying, and Mental Health: A Comparison of Adolescents With and Without Disabilities." Ruderman Family Foundation, n.d. Available at [https://rudermanfoundation.org/white\\_papers/ruderman-white-paper-reveals-students-with-disabilities-are-almost-twice-as-likely-to-be-victims-of-cyberbullying/](https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/ruderman-white-paper-reveals-students-with-disabilities-are-almost-twice-as-likely-to-be-victims-of-cyberbullying/). Accessed October 20, 2021.
- <sup>5</sup> Sallafranque-St-Louis, F., and C.L. Normand. "From Solitude to Solicitation: How People with Intellectual Disability or Autism Spectrum Disorder Use the Internet." *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> Normand, C.L., and F. Sallafranque-St-Louis. "Cybervictimization of Young People with an Intellectual or Developmental Disability: Risks Specific to Sexual Solicitation." *Journal of Applied Research on Intellectual Disabilities*, vol. 29, no. 2, March 2016, pp. 99–110. doi: 10.1111/jar.12163. Epub 2015 Apr 13. PMID: 25871891.
- <sup>7</sup> Fisher, K. W., H. Williamson, and N. Guerra. "Technology and Social Inclusion: Technology Training and Usage by Youth with IDD in the National Longitudinal Transition Study of 2012." *Inclusion*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2020, pp. 43–57.
- <sup>8</sup> KidsHealth. "Internet Safety." Website, Nemours Youthren's Health. Available at <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/net-safety.html>. Accessed August 3, 2021.
- <sup>9</sup> KidsHealth. "Internet Safety." Website, Nemours Youthren's Health. Available at <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/net-safety.html>. Accessed August 3, 2021.