Helping Youth Use Social Media More Safely

A Quick Guide For Parents and Those Supporting Children and Youth

There are many conversations happening right now about young people's access to social media. Until clear standards are established, there are practical steps that can help children and youth stay safer online.

Why This Matters

Social media is a big part of young people's lives, but how it's used matters. Excessive use (more than 2 hours/day) has been linked to:

- Sleep disruption
- Increased anxiety, depression, and distress
- Lower self-esteem and negative body image
- Challenges at school
- Cyberbullying
- Exposure to harmful or inappropriate content
- Social isolation
- Risk of online exploitation

Supporting Different Age Groups

Children and youth use social media differently at different stages of development. The strategies that work best depend on their age, level of independence, and ability to understand risks.

Youth Ages 13–17: Focus on Building Safer Habits

Key messages

- Use platforms with built-in teen protections (such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok)
- Be honest about your age when creating accounts
- Social media isn't risk-free - being cautious helps

Safety basics

- Keep accounts private
- Avoid connecting with people you don't know offline
- Block, report, and disengage from harmful interactions
- Talk to a trusted adult if something feels wrong

Start conversations that encourage critical thinking

- *"How does social media make you feel?"*
- *"Are you using social media in ways that support your wellbeing? If not, what can you do to reduce the negative effects?"*
- *"What happens when you use it late at night?"*
- *"What are you seeing online?"*

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(604) 777-7510 or 1 (877) 551-6611
#201 – 2071 Kingsway Avenue, Port Coquitlam, BC V3C 6N2

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Simple safety rule

- Block. Report. Tell a trusted adult.

Children Under 13: Focus on Protection

Key messages

- Social media platforms aren't built for kids under 13
- Waiting helps protect:
  - Mental health
  - Privacy
  - Personal safety

Safer options

- Access age-appropriate online activities and content that do not require accounts
- Use supervised platforms (e.g., YouTube Kids, Messenger Kids)
- Set clear screen time and content boundaries

Helping Young People Make Changes

Not all youth will be ready to change right away and that's okay.

Support them by:

- Encouraging **small, gradual changes to their social media use** (e.g. a gradual reduction in time or switching to age-appropriate platforms)
- Focusing on **informed choices**, not control
- Keeping conversations **open and judgment-free**
- Working with other adults in the youth's life for **consistency**
- Reinforcing that asking for help will **never lead to blame**

Key Takeaway

Safer social media use comes from:

- Awareness
- Healthy boundaries
- Ongoing, open conversations

Young people do best when they feel supported, informed, and safe.

Learn More

Explore practical tools and resources:

- 10 Tips for Keeping Kids Safe Online
- How to Talk to Kids About Online Exploitation
- Online Safety Plan

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