Digital Safety in the Midst of COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has changed, and is still changing, many aspects of our lives. We need to stay vigilant and follow safety precautions, such as hand-washing, social distance recommendations, and wearing protective face masks and gloves. In addition to our health and physical well-being, we must also be aware of other safety precautions that are significant during this time.

With the closure of schools, jobs, restaurants, and sites for recreation, to limit the spread of the virus many of us are turning to the internet for tools to connect. Children and teens are experiencing isolation and boredom, with a lot of additional time on their hands. Their world has been reduced to a glowing digital window (as if they weren’t on the screen enough already!). Unfortunately, child predators and those who aim to exploit are well-aware of the increase in children turning to digital devices for comfort. As children are exposed to a more of users, they are even more vulnerable to online sexual exploitation, grooming and cyberbullying. Increased screen time, without parental involvement and monitoring, can mean increased exposure to harmful content as well.

There is no better time than right now to sit down with your children and have a discussion about how they use technology, who they interact with, and how to navigate safely. Set some ground rules. Good resources for families can be found at Common Sense Media.

Teens, Mental Health, and Social Media

The teen years can be a tough time. The confusion and awkwardness of being post-child, but pre-adult (along with hormonal changes), can have emotions running in many directions. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic teens may also be feeling the stressors that parents are enduring: whether it be economic insecurity, family tension, or the uncertainty about the future.

Social media can be an outlet for some teens to express feelings and frustrations. It can prompt a dialogue between friends or it might reveal a cry-for-help that requires the intervention of family and loved ones. People can communicate in helpful and constructive ways, but the social platforms also have pitfalls. Vague emotional posts are likely to draw negative feedback and act as fodder for cyberbullies. Insecurities, frustrations, and negative feelings may become exacerbated. There may also be instances where young people portray themselves as struggling as a way to get attention.

Mental health concerns should always be taken seriously. Talk to your child about the difference between an honest outcry and attention-seeking behavior. Ask questions about how they use social media to express themselves. The article from Parents.com provides additional insight.

Zoombombing?

Families and friends have been using a number of different services to enjoy some online face-chatting with loved ones. This is a great way to stay connected while staying home. Among the many video-conferencing platforms (VTC), Zoom has been gaining popularity, and seen a rise in what has become known as “zoombombing.”

Zoombombing is a form of cyberattack, which involves an unwanted intrusion into group meet ups. The intruders have been known to display pornographic images, hate speech, verbal threats, doxing (revealing personal information of individuals in the meet), and other assaultive acts. COVID-19 has resulted in a rise of cyber-scams and VTC hacking across the U.S. The FBI has advised victims to file complaints with the Internet Crime Complaint Center (link provided below).

To avoid unwanted hacking online, you can require a password or use the “waiting room” feature to control incoming guests. Manage screen-sharing options by selecting “host only.” Only share links with specific people, and never share your conference links on social media. [https://www.ic3.gov/complaint/splash.aspx](https://www.ic3.gov/complaint/splash.aspx)

E-Info Hotline

The E-Info Hotline provides assistance to children, teens, parents and school personnel dealing with internet safety issues. If you believe that you or someone you know needs assistance, please call 1-888-414-7678 to contact an Internet Safety Specialist in the Attorney General’s Office.