Tips and talking points for the tech part of parenting

You're probably already aware of what your child's favorite device is. And if they're quite young, you likely know what their favorite apps and games are, too. A great way to start a conversation is to ask your child what they like most about these games or apps. Ask them every now and then, but don't overdo it. If you talk too much about it, your child may not want to talk about it anymore, and you want to keep the lines of communication open.

It helps to keep the subject light. If that's not possible because you're really concerned about your child's ability to balance their time both online and offline, you might tell your child about your worries and why. Ask them if they have any suggestions to ease your concerns. Listening with open minds and hearts can really help. You might consider creating a plan that works for both of you. If you need to establish rules, that's fine of course.

Here are some talking points for growing mutual trust and learning about safe, responsible tech and media use:

LEARNING ABOUT AN APP

1 **"I'd love to know why you like that app/game so much. What do you like about it? Could you show me?"**

TIP 1

Many parents find it helpful to use the social media apps and sites their children are using. If you choose to, you can keep a casual eye on your child's activity and familiarize yourself with the app's policies as well as its privacy, safety and security features.

TIP 2

Social media sites, apps and gaming platforms often have an "About" section that you can read to learn more about the app/game/site that your child likes. Another great option is to search for reputable sources that give details on the product and how people use it. Double check it is age appropriate when searching reputable sources.

2 **"Will you show me how it works?"**

TIP 1

This question is for learning how your child set up their account in the app (if they didn't do that with you), what they use it for most and how familiar they are with its features. The answers are unique to them and their interests.

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LEARNING ABOUT PROTECTIVE FEATURES

1 **"Does the app have protections for kids your age?"**

TIP 1

If your child knows about the protective features of the app, ask if they've checked out the safety and privacy features and set them. If not, you could work through the settings together.

TIP 2

Apps and platforms for people of all ages generally have safety and privacy protections for people age 13+; some, such as Facebook and Instagram, have special protections for teens through age 17. Reputable apps and games for children under 13, such as Messenger Kids, explicitly state that they're for children and have extra protections, including parental permission. Ideally, look for those protections in advance, so you and your child can later work through them together smoothly. You can usually find information on privacy and safety settings in the help section and/or safety center on the product's website.

TIP 3

You may want to remind your child that privacy settings can never protect their information completely. Tell them that if they're ever worried that something they might share online could get out of their control, it may be better not to share it at all.

TIP 4

You can also ask questions like: "What does 'online privacy' mean to you? How do we take care of our own privacy—how can we help others? How would you help your cousin/friends/little sister/brother?" Enlisting the help of older siblings and/or other older, social media-savvy relatives can be a great way to make sure your child has a great experience. Just try not to overwhelm them with support and keep it light and, ideally, fun.

2 **"Have you ever reported bad or mean stuff in the app or game? Can you show me how you do that? If not, is it because you never had to or because you don't know how?"**

TIP 1

This is an opportunity for both of you to learn about reporting harmful or inappropriate content through the app or game, which can help get the content deleted and, equally important, give your child a sense of control and resilience. It could be they haven't seen a mean or inappropriate post or photo to report, but if they do, now they know how to do something about it.

DEALING WITH NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

1 **"I'm sure your experience with that app is mostly great, but has anything happened to you or a friend in it that's not so great? Would you tell me about that?"**

TIP 1

Resilience is an essential part of well-being and mental health. It helps us navigate negative experiences, whether they happen online or offline, and people often develop them when faced with adversity. One way to help your child build resilience skills is to create a plan with them for dealing with tough situations that may come up online. For starters, ask your child what they do if peers comment negatively about something they shared in an app or a move they made in a game. They may tell you it's no big deal. Only you can tell if they're being totally sincere. It's possible they haven't encountered anything very negative, they're pretty resilient or they're afraid you'll overreact. If you sense it is a big deal but they don't want to talk about it, consider asking the next question.

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2 "You know that I want you to come to me if you saw anything online that upset you, right? I always want to help if you ever run into something bad."

TIP 1

Where online safety's concerned, this is probably the most important question you could ask your child. Most children naturally go to a parent when something makes them feel uncomfortable or hurt, but it's good to reinforce that. Online is no different from offline; either way, they need to know you are there for them. You can make that clear to them.

TIP 2

If you sense they're worried you'll over react, this is a valuable learning opportunity for you as well as them. When parents react strongly and take matters entirely in their own hands, they can reinforce their child's helplessness and loss of control in the situation. Those are outcomes you want to avoid because they can increase anxiety and depression. Support your child's growing agency and self-confidence in their capacity to change things for the better.

3 "Have you ever heard anything about weird or bad stuff that happens online? If that happened to you, what would you do?"

TIP 1

This is another way to ask the last question and make those two all-important points that you have their back, and that you want to work with them to figure out the best solution for them in that situation.

4 "How do you keep yourself safe online?"

TIP 1

Really wait for the answer before moving to the second part of this question—it may take a moment of thought, and the answer could help you get a sense of how your child defines "safe."

5 If they say they don't know how to, you could ask: "Is there any way I can help you with that?"

TIP 1

These questions are yet another way of asking the question—a way to help your child see they're in the driver's seat when it comes to self-care online as well as offline. Seeking support is part of self-care.

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