

Healthy Friendships and Internet Safety

Friendships are an integral part of every child's life. Friendships help shape children's identity and help children form opinions about themselves and their environment. Learning how to navigate the ins and outs of friendships is one of the most important skills children will learn. It is important to talk with children of all ages about what a healthy friendship is and what it means to be a good friend online and offline.

What does friendship have to do with Internet safety?

In an effort to reduce the risk of children being sexually exploited online, it is important that they understand healthy friendships. Those looking to sexually exploit children from this age group typically groom them under the guise of friendship. In order to empower children, they need to be explicitly taught the difference between healthy friendships and unhealthy friendships.

Discuss the three stages of friendship:

There are three stages to friendship. Sometimes friendships progress through the three stages below and sometimes friendships stay at one stage. People have all sorts of friendships at various levels. Appropriate behaviour in friendships is directly related to the stage of friendship you are at with someone.

1. Acquaintances

- People have many acquaintances.
- Acquaintances interact very casually.
- Acquaintances do not share private or personal information with one another.
- Acquaintances do not spend a lot of time together one-on-one.

2. Friends

- People have a handful of friends.
- Friends have known each other for a while (over a period of months).
- Friends enjoy spending time together.
- Friends share one-on-one time together, but not all the time.
- Friends share stories with each other, but not their most personal/private stories.



Healthy Friendships and Internet Safety (cont'd)

3. Close Friends
 - People only have a few close friends (some only have one).
 - Close friends have known each other for a long time (over several months/years).
 - Close friends spend a lot of time together one-on-one.
 - Close friends prefer each other's company to other friends (but they both have other friends too).
 - Close friends confide in one another personal stories that they wouldn't tell other friends.

Teach your child that friendship is about:

- **Enjoyment** — Friends enjoy spending time together.
- **Sharing** — Friends are able to share thoughts and feelings with each other.
- **Respect** — Friends value each other and consider each other's feelings.
- **Dignity** — Friends only ask each other to do things that they feel comfortable doing. Friends do not share each other's private feelings and thoughts with others.
- **Honesty** — Friends are truthful and sincere about what they say to each other.
- **Trust** — Friends can rely on each other to not share information that is said in confidence or say anything that would embarrass them. (The exception here is if a friend shares information that indicates they are in trouble and need help such as abuse, emotional distress, addiction, etc. This type of information should be shared with a safe adult.)
- **Kindness** — Friends are helpful and thoughtful of each other.
- **Caring** — Friends are concerned about each other.
- **Listening** — Friends listen to each other.
- **Acceptance** — Friends like each other for who they are, and do not make fun of one another.
- **Tolerance** — Friends are patient with one another and understand that everybody makes mistakes.
- **Helping** — Friends help each other out when they are having a hard time.
- **Loyalty** — Friends stick up for each other and do not talk behind each other's back.
- **Dependability** — Friends are there for each other when they say they will be.



Healthy Friendships and Internet Safety (cont'd)

Remind your child that in friendship:

- Friends do not misuse information you've shared with them to hurt you.
- Friends don't make things up or say things in public to embarrass you.
- Friends listen and are understanding.
- Friends can disagree with each other without putting each other down.
- Friends give support and encouragement.
- Friends respect decisions even if it isn't what they want.
- Friends support you when you have a problem.

Remind your child that all of this stays true for texting and other online spaces!

Discuss with your child what they think friendship is about.

Possible answers might include:

Friends...

- Like to hang out together.
- Like to share and confide in each other.
- Have fun together.
- Can trust each other.
- Can rely on each other.

Add your own!

You and your child can add your answers to the list:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

