

A PARENTAL GUIDE TO TEENS, TWEENS, AND TECHNOLOGY



The West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services is the state sexual assault coalition. For additional information or to seek services visit www.fris.org. Learn how you can get involved in preventing abuse at ItsOnUsWV.org. Prevention is possible!

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Teens, Tweens, and Technology: Parenting in a Digital Age



Introduction

Advancing technology has drastically changed how tweens and teens interact with their peers. Preferred connection methods and social media “channels” popular with youth change as new technology, apps, and platforms emerge. With the wide availability of mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets, most teens and many tweens have “on-the-go” internet access that lets them communicate anytime/anywhere with each other, using:

- Social media applications (apps) and website platforms that feature text/instant messaging, image/video/information sharing, and/or chatting—youth favorites include YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and to a lesser extent, Facebook
- Text messaging and voice/video calling (and less frequently, emailing)
- Gaming software with chat/text messaging features

Communications technology has potential benefits for youth—such as maintaining contact with friends and networking with others with common interests—**but it comes with challenges and risks too.**

- It offers users anonymity and a false sense of a safe space without consequences.
- Information shared may be inappropriate for all children or for children of certain ages.
- Online information can spread quickly, be manipulated, and cannot be retracted.
- Excessive use can lead to mental health issues.

A youth’s ability to virtually connect with others also raises concerns related to sexting, contact by sexual predators, cyberbullying, and online dating abuse.



- [Apps Guide That Kids Use Most Frequently](#)
- [Media Use by Tweens and Teens 2021](#)
- [Teen’s Social Media and Technology Research Study 2022](#)
- [What Age Can My Child Start Social Networking](#)
- [Excessive Social Media Use Mental Health Issues](#)
- [Cyberbullying](#)
- [Statistics](#)
- [Online Safety Glossary](#)



Sexting

(Section drawn/adapted from Hinduja & Patchin)

Sexting is electronically sending or receiving sexually explicit or suggestive images and/or videos. Most commonly, teens and tweens send semi-nude or nude pictures of themselves to others via their phones. They may send images to romantic interests or partners without being aware of possible legal and social consequences. Receivers may share sexts with their peers and beyond, without awareness of the implications and extent of harm that can result. Receivers' distribution of sext material without senders' informed consent can violate child pornography/other laws. Youth have been arrested for sending/receiving sexts. WV laws have not been tested in court, but they do not specifically apply only to adult offenders (see the last section on related state laws). Sending, receiving and distributing sexts can also lead to "sextortion"—where extorters threaten senders with further dissemination of the sext, unless their demands (e.g., for more images, sexual acts or money) are met. Extorters are often current/former romantic partners or acquaintances of the youth being sextorted.



Tips to help parents protect teens and tweens from sexting:

Talk to your child about their online activities—what sites they are using, what apps are on their phone, what they are posting, who they are communicating with, etc.

- Outline risks when communicating online.
- Be clear that messages or images they send online/via their phones are not private or anonymous, and that anyone—even their friends—can share them.
- Talk with them about potential consequences of misuse of technology—including how messages/images shared cannot be retracted and legal consequences.
- Be clear with your child about what you consider appropriate phone/online behavior.
- Consider placing limits on your child's electronic communications.

If your child is receiving sexts, their sexts were shared, or result in sextortion:

- Talk with your child candidly about what happened to get the facts. Help your child understand potential consequences and what can be done to mitigate potential problems.
- If your child has sent sexts, restrain from reacting harshly. Apply appropriate consequences with the goal of preventing future sexting. Don't shame or negatively label them.
- They likely are mortified that you know they were involved in sexting. Avoid discussing the incident with anyone else, unless necessary (see below).
- Save or print messages/images as a record, just in case there is an investigation.
- If it is determined that their sexually explicit images have been shared with others online, contact the sites on which they have been shared and request that they be removed. Block further messages from senders.

- If there is evidence that other youth possess images of your child, consider contacting their parents to inform them. Work together to informally address the behaviors/stop image distribution. If other parents don't seem to share your concerns, consider enlisting help from school officials or law enforcement in extreme cases.
- If sexually explicit images have been distributed to students beyond the original sender and receiver, contact school officials for possible support and intervention (address safety issues, etc.). Boards of education are required to have policies on bullying and harassment; most are posted on their websites.
- If you believe that your child is being exploited by another child or an adult, contact law enforcement.
- Distribution of explicit/private images beyond their intended recipient can be emotionally damaging for anyone, but especially for youth. Consider helping your child seek counseling.



RESOURCES

- [A Brief Guide for Educators and Parents](#)
- [Mobile Device Parental Controls](#)
- [Social Media Parental Controls](#)



Contact by Sexual Predators

(Section drawn/adapted from Enough is Enough)

Sexual predators and sex traffickers can easily conceal their identity when trolling for tweens and teens online and attempting to lure them into sexually-explicit conversations and in-person meetings. Grooming is the process by which they befriend and gain trust of children in order to take advantage of them for sexual purposes. They often use social media sites, gaming programs, chat rooms, video chat, etc. to contact, groom and sexually exploit tweens and teens.



Tips for parents:

- Learn what apps/accounts are on your child's devices. Know their user names and passwords.
- Remind your child that they can't really know who they are communicating with online. It could be the person they think it is, but it might not be—urge them to engage cautiously. Encourage them not to do/share anything online that they wouldn't do or say in person or with a stranger. Stress that they not share personally identifiable information.
- Recognize warning signs that your child may be in contact with an online predator/trafficker (they are secretive/obsessive about online activities, get angry if they can't get online, receive calls or gifts from people you do not know, etc.).
- Block strangers on your child's devices and use privacy settings on social networking pages.

- Remind your child to never arrange to meet with someone that they have only met online. Urge them to come to you if they receive a request for an in-person meeting.



- [Internet Safety 101](#)



Cyberbullying

(Section drawn/adapted from Hinduja & Patchin)

Cyberbullying is willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of electronic devices.

Since they are constantly connected to technology, teens and tweens are susceptible to cyberbullying and being cyberbullied. They can send hurtful texts or spread rumors using phones or tablets, target others through hurtful content and profiles on social media and livestreaming platforms, or threaten or repeatedly stalk others through private messages or anonymous apps. The repeated nature of the bullying intensifies the damages to the target.

Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in ways that can be more devastating.

Cyberbullies can hide their identity from their targets, their actions can easily go viral, and since the bullying is virtual, they can be distanced from their targets' reactions and the harm they are causing. Since adults are sometimes slow to recognize and respond to cyberbullying, cyberbullies may feel that there are little to no consequences for their actions.

Those being targeted often require help to stop bullying behaviors and mitigate negative outcomes, including but not limited to self-harm and interference with school success (see the section on page 7 related West Virginia laws).



What parents can do if cyberbullying occurs:

- Talk calmly with/listen closely to your child to understand what is occurring.
- Make sure your child feels safe and supported in stopping the bullying.
- Collect evidence (print out/make screen shots, keep notes of what occurred, etc.).
- If your child and the bully attend the same school, work with the school to investigate, keep your child safe, etc. Urge educators to follow the tips below. Refrain from contacting the bully's parents.
- Contact involved social media sites to report/gather evidence/remove content.
- Cyberbullying can cause significant emotional distress; help your child seek counseling, if needed.
- Report to law enforcement if threats are involved.
- Take action to prevent reoccurrences (parental controls, block sensors, etc.) and encourage your child to continue to talk with you if future incidents occur.



- [Report Cyberbullying](#)
- [Learn More About Cyberbullying](#)
- [What to do When Your Child Cyberbullies Others](#)



What schools can do if cyberbullying occurs:

- Respond to bullying based on related school policies and consequences.
- Work with parents to convey the school's intolerance of these behaviors.
- Take cyberbullying seriously. Consider how behaviors may also be Title IX violations and/or create the need for a Personal Safety Order for the targeted student.
- Enlist the help of law enforcement if the incident involves a possible safety threat.
- Develop a response that is commensurate with the harm done.
- Instruct parents to contact an attorney, since they may have other legal recourses.
- Contact phone providers if threats or explicit content are transmitted.
- Keep evidence of cyberbullying if disciplinary actions are planned. Work with social media sites to remove content/gather evidence.
- Use creative punishments for minor forms of cyberbullying (e.g., creating anti-cyberbullying posters or make brief presentations to younger students about the responsible use of technology).

Educators are encouraged to promote a safe, respectful school climate that supports cyberbullying prevention.



- [Developing a Positive School Climate to Prevent Bullying and Cyberbullying](#)



Digital Dating Abuse

(Section drawn/adapted from Hinduja & Patchin)

Similar to cyberbullying, **digital dating abuse involves using technology to harass a current or former romantic partner to control, coerce, intimidate, annoy or threaten them.** Since youth in romantic relationships are often constantly in touch with each other via texting, social media and video chat, opportunities for digital dating abuse can easily arise.



Tips for parents to share with their teens and tweens:

- Decide how often and how you want to be in touch online with your romantic interest/partner.

- Consider the content of your communications. If it is a difficult topic, save it for a face-to-face conversation where what you are saying is less likely to be misinterpreted.
- Be aware that your location may be able to be tracked when communicating online.
- Maintain healthy online boundaries while in romantic relationships. Reject controlling behavior (e.g., online demands to know where you are at all times) or disrespect of your privacy (e.g., going through your messages without your permission). Avoid giving in to pressure to share your passwords. Don't feel obligated to send sexts. Beware of passive-aggressiveness (e.g., if you don't give your partner what they want online).
- Consider blocking/unfriending/unfollowing individuals from former or unhealthy relationships



- [Digital Dating Abuse](#)
- [Love is Respect](#)

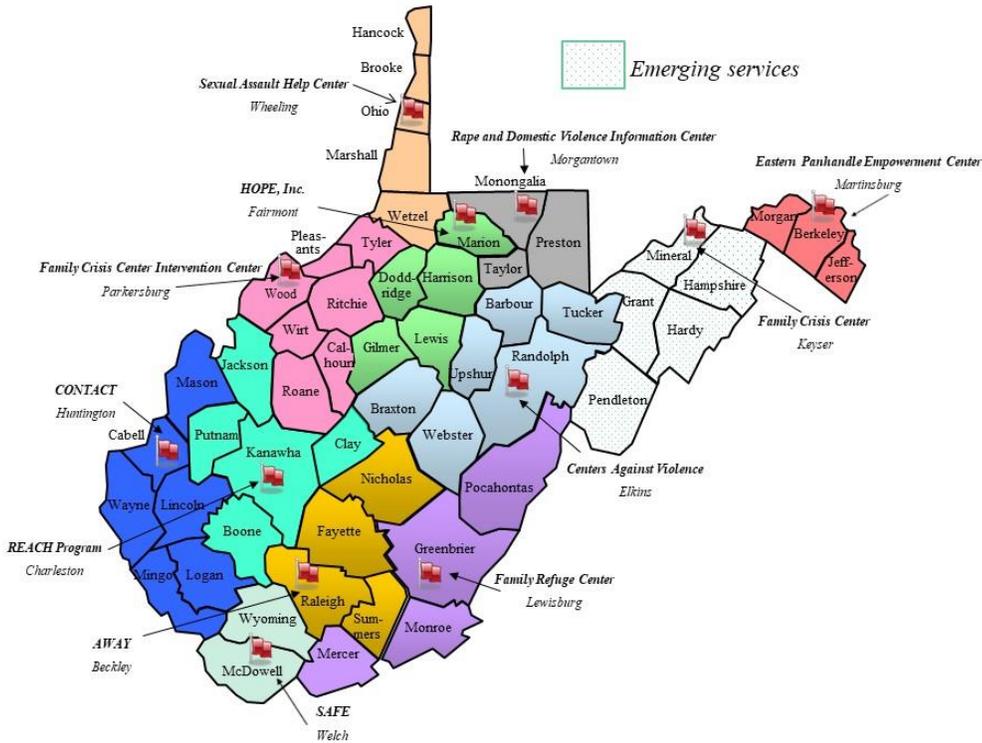


Tips to Share with Youth: Communicating Via Electronic Devices

(Drawn/adapted from Enough is Enough, Hinduja & Patchin)

- Think before you message, post, chat, etc. There are no takebacks.
- Don't share personal identifying information.
- Be aware that your location might be tracked.
- Don't reply to text messages from unknown sources; block the senders.
- Don't send, ask for or forward sexually explicit or suggestive pictures or videos. Tell a trusted/safe adult if someone sends/requests such images.
- Don't send/share information that might hurt or embarrass someone.
- Don't accept online activity meant to intimidate, threaten or harm you or anyone else. Tell a trusted/safe adult.
- Tell a trusted/safe adult if you receive threatening, mean or sexual messages. Block the senders.
- Know that you can't recognize a predator posing as a teen or trusted/safe adult online.
- Never arrange to meet with someone that you have only met online.
- Never let someone you don't know use your device; never leave your devices unattended.
- Maintain healthy boundaries. Reject controlling and disrespectful behaviors. Avoid giving in to pressure to share passwords or send sexts.
- Consider blocking, unfriending and unfollowing individuals from former relationships that are unhealthy,

For victims of sextortion, stalking, or sexual harassment, free help is available through
[WV Rape Crisis Centers:](#)



National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE

Related West Virginia Laws

West Virginia Code addressing child pornography:

- **§61-8C-2b** prohibits the use of minors in photographing/filming sexually explicit conduct. A person found guilty of this felony can be fined up to \$10,000 and/or imprisoned for up to 10 years.
- **§61-8C-3** prohibits the distribution/exhibiting of material depicting minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct. A person guilty of this felony can be imprisoned for up to 2 years and fined up to \$2,000.
- Under **§61-8A-5**, an adult who assists a minor in producing obscene matter, knowing that the person is under 18, is guilty of a felony and can be fined up to \$50,000 and/or imprisoned for up to 10 years.
- **§61-8C-3a** prohibits child erotica. Persons found guilty of this misdemeanor can be fined up to \$1,000 and/or jailed for up to 1 year. **§61-8C-3b** prohibits juveniles from manufacturing, possessing and distributing nude or partially nude images of minors. Juvenile offenders are guilty of delinquency.

West Virginia Code **§61-8-28a** prohibits exploitation of private, sexually explicit images. If a person intentionally discloses/threatens to disclose (to harass, intimidate, threaten, humiliate, embarrass or coerce) a sexually explicit image/images of sexually explicit conduct of another (in which the person depicted had a reasonable expectation that the images would not be publicly disclosed), that person is guilty of a misdemeanor and can be jailed for up to 1 year and/or fined \$1,000 to \$5,000. Subsequent violations are felonies with penalties of up to 3 years imprisonment and/or fines of \$2,500 to \$10,000.

West Virginia Computer Crime and Abuse Act:

- **§61-3-14a** prohibits obscene, anonymous, harassing and threatening communication by computer. A person guilty of this misdemeanor can be jailed for up to 6 months and/or fined up to \$1000.
- **§61-3C-14b** addresses soliciting a minor via computer and soliciting a minor and traveling to engage the minor in prohibited sexual activity. An adult guilty of this felony can be imprisoned between 2 to 10 years and/or fined up to \$5,000.
- **§61-3C-14c** addresses cyberbullying and other electronic harassment of minors. It is unlawful for a person to use a computer/computer network to engage in conduct with the intent to harass, intimidate or bully a minor, including but not limited to posting, disseminating or encouraging others to post or disseminate on the Internet private, personal or sexual information pertaining to a minor; or posting on the Internet obscene materials in a real or doctored image of a minor. A person who is guilty of this misdemeanor can be jailed for up to 1 year and/or fined up to \$500.

References

Enough is Enough. (2022). Internet Safety 101 Quick Guides, including Internet Predators & Sex Traffickers 101, Mobile & Wireless 101 and Social Media 101.

Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. Cyberbullying Research Center, including Teen Sexting: A Brief Guide for Parents and Educators (2022), Cyberbullying Fact Sheet: Identification, Prevention and Response (2022), Sexting: Advice for Parents (2021), Digital Dating Abuse: Top Ten Tips for Teens (2020) and Responding to Cyberbullying: Top Ten Tips for Educators (2018).