

Digital parenting

No matter where you are located in the world, your children probably have access to the Internet and your older children are likely to have smartphones and/or tablets.

While the Internet can be a powerful educational tool and a wonderful way to keep in touch with friends and family around the world, there are also more chances young children will view sexual and violent images – and that can have an effect on their emotional and mental development. In addition, smartphones and tablets have made the virtual world accessible from anywhere and at any time, making the sharing of inappropriate material easier. And that can make a parent's job of protecting their children from harm even harder.

The role of the brain

Children and teenagers typically don't think about short- or long-term consequences. They can't. The frontal cortex, the region of the brain that controls reasoning and helps us think of the consequences before we act, develops later than other areas. In fact, the frontal cortex is still changing and maturing well into young adulthood. However, the amygdala, the region of the brain responsible for instinctual reactions, including fear and aggressive behavior, develops very early in childhood.

So children and teens are more likely to unintentionally express themselves in ways adults would consider inappropriate – not fully comprehending that what goes on the Internet, stays on the Internet, and could potentially come back to haunt them when they're older.

Many parents can, if they feel it necessary, supervise their child's online activities at home. But thanks to mobile technology, much of what children text, post and share online is now out of a parent's control. This is why digital parenting has become so important.

Parenting styles

Every family and culture has different ways of parenting. Traditionally, parenting styles have fallen into three basic categories: authoritarian, permissive and authoritative. In her book, *Kids are worth it! Giving Your Child the Gift of Inner Discipline*, Barbara Coloroso calls them the brick wall, jellyfish and backbone styles of parenting.

Authoritarian (brick wall)

Like a brick wall, an authoritarian parent imposes a strict and rigid structure. The authoritarian parent makes all family decisions and exercises complete control, enforcing rules with punishment. Children have little or no participation or choice and tend to become obedient without question (even when it could harm them), fearful or rebellious. Children of this family style are taught "what to think."

Permissive (jellyfish)

Many children raised by authoritarian parents grow up to be permissive parents. They know they didn't like how they were raised, and they don't want to do the same thing with their children, but they may not know what to do instead. These parents may be indifferent (don't care what their children do) or permissive (let their children do whatever they want). Jellyfish parents generally have trouble setting limits or rules, and their children often have difficulty learning respect or responsibility. They're taught "not to think."

Authoritative (backbone)

Authoritative parents provide a family structure with flexibility. They have clear and realistic expectations of their children, and rules are set about things that matter most—safety, responsibility and treating people and property with respect. Limits are clearly defined and kindly, but firmly, enforced. Children are taught to respect by being respected. Their opinions and choices are considered. Mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn and discipline is used for teaching, not for punishing. Children in these families are taught “how to think.”

The consistency, fairness and respect of the authoritative parenting style are the elements most likely to create a home in which children can thrive. They also describe the ‘ideal’ digital parent.

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While the Internet provides children with the information they need at the click of mouse, it can also expose them to subjects and images that can upset and traumatize them. They may need reassurance and comfort. And as children look to their parents to provide moral guidance, they also look to them to explain the unexplainable and provide comfort when distressed.

Discussing tough subjects and providing discipline about online behavior can be difficult for any parent. But both are necessary in our digital age. Digital parenting is about being strict when needed, allowing some independence when appropriate, and providing guidance when asked. The bottom line is your child must feel comfortable coming to you if they need to talk about something frightening or confusing they have seen online.

No matter where you live and parent, your children’s use of the Internet and social media is bound to enter your world and be affected by your parenting style. Adapting to this new reality is critical so that you can teach your children to be respectful, responsible and safe.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP. Contact details can be found on your EAP brochure or you can call your local operator and request to place a collect call to Canada at 905-886-3605. You will be put in touch with our Care Access Centre who will arrange for help closer to home.