

Guide for Parents & Caregivers

Raising Digitally Smart & Safe Teens



SAFE 
& SMART
DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

This guide was developed by global development and education organization IREX as a part of UK government “Digital Engagement: Safe & Smart” program supported by the Ministry of Education of Slovakia. The guide is written for parent and caregiver audiences, and it comes as a supplement to the corresponding curriculum on digital engagement for students of grades 7-9.

2025



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: PARENTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE	4
A. Why Digital Parenting Matters	5
B. How to Use This Guide	6
UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEEN’S DIGITAL WORLD	8
A. The Impact of Technology on Teen Identity & Social Life	9
B. Reflecting on Your Own Digital Habits	11
RECOGNIZING ONLINE RISKS & THREATS	13
A. Dangerous TikTok Challenges	14
B. Cyberbullying: Recognizing and Addressing Online Harassment	16
C. Body Shaming and Unrealistic Body Standards	18
D. Exposure to Inappropriate or Harmful Content	20
E. Online Grooming and Sextortion	22
F. Manipulated Content	24
G. Online Shopping Scams: Protecting Teens from Fraud	25
H. Privacy Violations, Data Misuse and Digital Footprint	27
I. Overuse and Addiction: Recognizing and Managing Screen Time	30
DECODING MEDIA: ANALYZING CONTENT FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING	31
A. Decoding Media: Is Media Informing or Persuading You?	32
B. How to Spot Clickbait and Avoid Deceptive Content	36
C. Identifying Reliable Sources: How to Find Trustworthy Information	39
D. Cognitive Biases and Distortions	43
E. Understanding Algorithms: How Social Media Shapes What We See	47
F. Evaluating Influencers: Understanding Their Impact	50
G. Identifying Advertisements: Recognizing Sponsored & Manipulative Content	53
H. Artificial Intelligence: Helps, Harms, or Both?	55
I. Recognizing Harmful Stereotypes and Hate Speech	58
DIGITAL WELL-BEING & HEALTHY BOUNDARIES	61
A. Teens & Tech: Encouraging Digital Wellness Without Power Struggles	62
B. Less Screen Time: Creating Shared Family Experiences	64
FINAL TIPS & RESOURCES	66
A. Key Takeaways for Parents	67
B. Where to Learn More	69



INTRODUCTION: PARENTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

- 5 A. Why Digital Parenting Matters
- 6 B. How to Use This Guide



A. WHY DIGITAL PARENTING MATTERS

Parenting in the digital age comes with new challenges. Social media, online gaming, and instant access to information shape teens' identities, relationships, and worldview. While technology offers learning and connection, it also brings risks like cyberbullying, information manipulation, and online predators.

In Slovakia, **48% of adolescents have experienced cyberbullying**, highlighting the prevalence of online harassment. Every post, comment, or shared detail contributes to their **digital footprint**, which can impact future opportunities like college admissions or jobs.

So, should parents focus on limiting screen time or building digital literacy? The key isn't **eliminating technology** but **helping teens use it wisely**. Instead of strict rules, equip them with skills to navigate the digital world safely. **Open conversations, critical thinking, and awareness** are the best tools for digital parenting.

The good news? You don't need to be a tech expert - just **stay engaged, set a good example, and keep communication open**. This guide will give you practical tools to help your teen make smart, responsible choices online.



B. HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to be practical, flexible, and easy to navigate. You can read it cover to cover or jump directly to the sections most relevant to you:

- **Chapter 2: Your Teen, You, and the Digital Age** - Reflect on how technology shapes both your teen's and your own digital habits, relationships, and well-being.
- **Chapter 3: Online Risks and Threats** - Learn about the biggest digital dangers, from cyberbullying to online manipulation, and how to protect your teen.
- **Chapter 4: Decoding Media** - Help your teen recognize information manipulation, digital persuasion, and hidden agendas online.
- **Chapter 5: Digital Well-Being & Healthy Boundaries** - Discover strategies for managing screen time, fostering positive tech habits, and balancing offline activities.
- **Chapter 6: Key Takeaways & Further Resources** - Find essential parenting insights, expert resources, and practical tools for ongoing support.

Each section includes:

- **Clear explanations** of the digital challenges teens face.
- **Conversation starters** to help you discuss these topics with your child.
- **Practical steps** to guide your parenting approach.

There's no one-size-fits-all answer to digital parenting, but by staying informed and **creating an open, judgment-free space for conversations**, you're already taking the most important step.

Let's get started!



UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEEN'S DIGITAL WORLD

- 9 A. The Impact of Technology on Teen Identity & Social Life
- 11 B. Reflecting on Your Own Digital Habits



A. THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON TEEN IDENTITY & SOCIAL LIFE

For today's teens, the digital world isn't just a part of life - it's where friendships are built, identities are explored, and information is consumed. Unlike previous generations, who may have separated their online and offline lives, teens today experience them as deeply intertwined.



HOW DIGITAL LIFE SHAPES TEENS:

- **Social Media & Self-Identity:** Teens often use social media to express themselves, seek validation, and shape how others perceive them. Likes, comments, and follower counts [can become measures of self-worth](#), influencing their [confidence](#) and mental well-being.
- **Online Friendships & Communication:** Many teens maintain close friendships through messaging apps, gaming platforms, and social media. While this allows for connection, it can also [make them vulnerable](#) to cyberbullying, online pressure, or even manipulation.
- **Information & Influence:** Teens are constantly exposed to news, trends, and opinions online, which shapes their worldview. The challenge? Not all information

is accurate or trustworthy, and social media algorithms often reinforce existing beliefs rather than encouraging critical thinking.

- **FOMO & Digital Peer Pressure:** [The fear of missing out \(FOMO\)](#) is heightened by social media, where teens see curated highlights of others' lives. This can lead to comparison, anxiety, and [unhealthy online behaviors](#) - such as engaging in risky trends just to fit in.

Understanding these dynamics helps parents support their teens in developing a healthy relationship with technology - one that enhances their lives rather than controls them.



B. REFLECTING ON YOUR OWN DIGITAL HABITS

It's easy to focus on managing our teens' screen time, but have we ever stopped to reflect on our own digital habits? The way we use technology - whether it's constantly checking notifications, scrolling mindlessly, or struggling to unplug - can influence how our teens approach their own screen time.

Instead of aiming for perfection, the goal is **awareness and balance**. Taking a moment to assess your digital habits can help you set a healthier example while also improving your own well-being.



SELF-ASSESSMENT: HOW MINDFUL ARE YOU ABOUT YOUR DIGITAL HABITS?

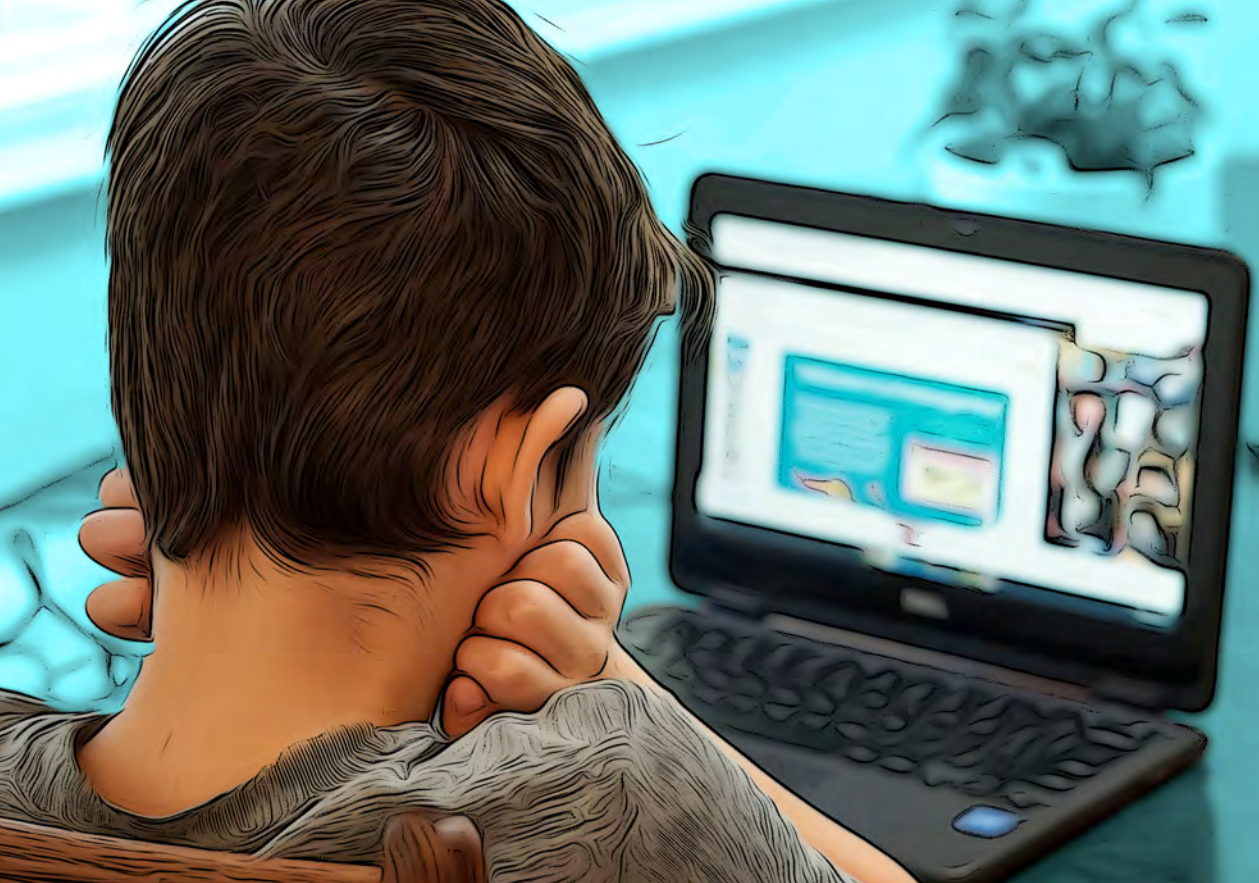
Consider these questions as a personal check-in:

- Do I set limits on my screen time, or do I often lose track of time online?
- Do I put my phone away during family meals and important conversations?
- Do I engage in meaningful offline activities, like hobbies or exercise?
- Do I fact-check information before sharing it?
- Do I model respectful online behavior, avoiding negativity and arguments?

- Do I balance work and personal screen use, or does one take over?
- Do I actively listen to my child without digital distractions?

If some of these questions make you pause, you're not alone. Small changes—like creating tech-free zones, being intentional about screen time, or prioritizing face-to-face interactions—can make a big difference.

The goal isn't to be a perfect role model but to be **a mindful one**. By reflecting on your own habits, you create an open and understanding environment where both you and your teen can work toward a **healthy digital balance together**.



RECOGNIZING ONLINE RISKS & THREATS

The internet offers teens endless opportunities for learning, entertainment, and socializing, but it also comes with risks like cyberbullying, body shaming, and online manipulation. This chapter helps parents recognize these dangers, start meaningful conversations, and set clear boundaries. With real-life examples, discussion questions, and practical strategies, it equips families to support safer and more responsible digital habits.

- 14 A. Dangerous Social Media Challenges & Viral Trends
- 16 B. Cyberbullying & Online Harassment
- 18 C. Body Image Pressures & Unrealistic Beauty Standards
- 20 D. Exposure to Inappropriate & Harmful Content
- 22 E. Online Grooming, Sextortion & Scams
- 24 F. Manipulated Content
- 25 G. Online Shopping Scams: Protecting Teens from Fraud
- 27 H. Privacy Violations, Data Misuse and Digital Footprint
- 30 I. Overuse and Addiction: Recognizing and Managing Screen Time



A. DANGEROUS TIKTOK CHALLENGES

TikTok is a social media platform where users create and share short videos, often featuring music, dance, and various trends. One popular feature of TikTok is the rise of “challenges” - activities that users attempt and share with their followers. While some challenges are harmless and fun, others can be extremely dangerous, encouraging risky behaviors that lead to serious injuries or even fatalities. These viral trends spread quickly due to social pressure, curiosity, and the desire for online attention.



EXAMPLES

- **The Paracetamol Challenge** - A dangerous [TikTok trend that surfaced in Slovakia](#), encouraging children to take excessive amounts of **paracetamol (acetaminophen)**, believing it would create a “high” or demonstrate their tolerance to painkillers. Slovakian doctors warned about irreversible health consequences, and authorities urged parents to talk to their children about medication misuse.
- **The Fire Challenge** - Teens were encouraged to **set parts of their body on fire using flammable substances** before attempting to put out the flames. This reckless act led to **severe burns and emergency hospitalizations** in multiple countries.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

Use these discussion prompts to help your child evaluate online trends:

- **What could go wrong if someone participates in this challenge?** - Encourage your child to think beyond the immediate thrill and consider potential injuries, legal consequences, or lasting effects.
- **Who is promoting this challenge, and why?** - Discuss whether influencers or companies are gaining views, money, or attention while young people take the risks.
- **Collaboratively review trends:** Ask if they'd be open to showing you what's trending—not as a way to monitor them, but to explore together.
- Ask, “What could go wrong?” rather than stating, “This is dangerous.”
- Have them consider **injuries, legal consequences, or lasting social effects.** (Example: Some TikTok trends have led to arrests, school suspensions, or permanent online embarrassment.)
- Discuss **peer pressure:** “What would you do if a friend encouraged you to join a challenge you weren't comfortable with?”



B. CYBERBULLYING: RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING ONLINE HARASSMENT

[Cyberbullying](#) can take many forms, including spreading rumors, sharing embarrassing photos or videos, sending threatening messages, or excluding someone from online groups. Unlike traditional bullying, [cyberbullying follows teens](#) everywhere - on their phones, in gaming communities, and across social media, and it tends to be harsher because it happens entirely in the digital space, where people often say or do things they wouldn't in face-to-face interactions. Without the immediate presence of the victim, online bullies may feel emboldened to be more cruel or relentless. This **constant exposure** can lead to anxiety, depression, and even self-harm.

Your support matters - teens who face online harassment need a safe space to talk and seek help.



EXAMPLES

- **Online Shaming Leading to Self-Harm** - A 15-year-old girl was relentlessly bullied online after a private photo was shared without her consent. Classmates and strangers sent her hateful messages, and the harassment escalated so severely

that she began avoiding school and showing signs of depression. Her parents only discovered the extent of the bullying when it had already deeply affected her mental health.

- **Group Chat Humiliation & Public Exposure** - A 13-year-old boy was secretly recorded during a nervous classroom presentation. The video, along with cruel comments mocking his speech, was shared in a private chat among classmates and later posted online. The public humiliation led him to withdraw from social activities and experience severe anxiety.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

Use these discussion prompts to guide conversations with your teen about online harassment:

- **Why do you think people bully others online?** Help your child recognize that bullies often act out due to their own insecurities or social pressures.
- **How do you think cyberbullying impacts someone's mental health?** Discuss the emotional toll and long-term consequences of online harassment.
- **What steps can you take if you or a friend experiences cyberbullying?** Go over reporting tools, blocking features, and when to seek adult help. Reassure them that **mistakes happen**, and the most important thing is to **ask for help instead of hiding it out of fear**.
- Teach them that if a private photo is shared, they should **not engage with threats** but instead:
 - **Tell a trusted adult** immediately.
 - **Use platform reporting tools** to request content removal.
 - **Ask for support**—cyberbullying hotlines or legal resources may help if the situation escalates.
- **How would you feel if this happened to you, and who would you feel safe talking to about it?** Encourage your child to identify a support system and understand the importance of seeking help.



C. BODY SHAMING AND UNREALISTIC BODY STANDARDS

Social media platforms are saturated with meticulously curated and edited images that promote [unrealistic beauty standards](#). The widespread use of filters, photo-editing applications, and the pervasive influencer culture create an illusion of perfection, leading many teenagers to feel pressured to alter their appearance to conform to unattainable ideals. This phenomenon contributes significantly to body dissatisfaction among adolescents. For instance, [a study found that 50% of adolescent females and 31% of males are unhappy with their bodies, highlighting the profound impact of these unrealistic portrayals](#).

Body shaming—the act of mocking, criticizing, or making negative comments about someone’s appearance—manifests in various forms, from harsh comments on photos to subtle comparisons that leave teens feeling inadequate. The prevalence of social media exacerbates this issue; a survey revealed that [40% of teenagers reported](#) that images on these platforms caused them to worry about their body image, and more than a third had restricted their diets due to such concerns.

The constant exposure to unattainable beauty ideals and the experience of body shaming can have severe consequences on teenagers’ mental health. Research indicates that such experiences can lead to depression, anxiety, and poor body image.

Furthermore, body dissatisfaction has been [linked to risk-taking behaviors and mental health problems](#) in young people, with some considering extreme measures such as cosmetic surgery or steroid use to achieve their desired appearance.



REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES

- **The Filtered Reality Trap** - A 15-year-old girl became obsessed with using filters to smooth her skin and change her facial features for selfies. She refused to post unedited photos and felt intense anxiety when seeing her real reflection in the mirror.
- **Body Shaming in Comments** - A teen boy shared a fitness progress photo, feeling proud of his hard work. Instead of encouragement, he received mocking comments about his body size. Discouraged, he began to doubt his progress and lost motivation.
- **The Comparison Spiral** - A 14-year-old girl followed influencers who showcased “perfect” bodies and diets. She constantly compared herself, feeling she was never thin or attractive enough. This led to restrictive eating habits and low self-esteem.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT BODY IMAGE ONLINE

Use these discussion prompts to encourage open conversations with your teen:

- **How do social media filters and editing tools affect our perception of beauty?** - Talk about how these tools create unrealistic standards that don't reflect real life.
- **How do influencers and celebrities shape beauty expectations?** - Discuss how many rely on professional editing, cosmetic procedures, and strategic posing to maintain a certain image.
- **Have you ever felt pressured to change your appearance because of social media?** - Encourage self-reflection and normalize feelings of insecurity while reinforcing self-acceptance.
- **What would you say to a friend struggling with body image issues?** - Promote empathy and the importance of supporting others rather than contributing to unrealistic standards.



D. EXPOSURE TO INAPPROPRIATE OR HARMFUL CONTENT

The internet provides teens with endless opportunities, but it also exposes them to content that may be [inappropriate or harmful](#). Without seeking it out, they can encounter **adult content, violent material, extremist ideologies, and unhealthy online communities**. Social media algorithms, search engines, and peer-shared links often lead them to **graphic images, radical propaganda, or discussions promoting harmful behaviors**. Exposure to such content can **distort perceptions, affect mental health, and increase vulnerability to manipulation**.



REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES

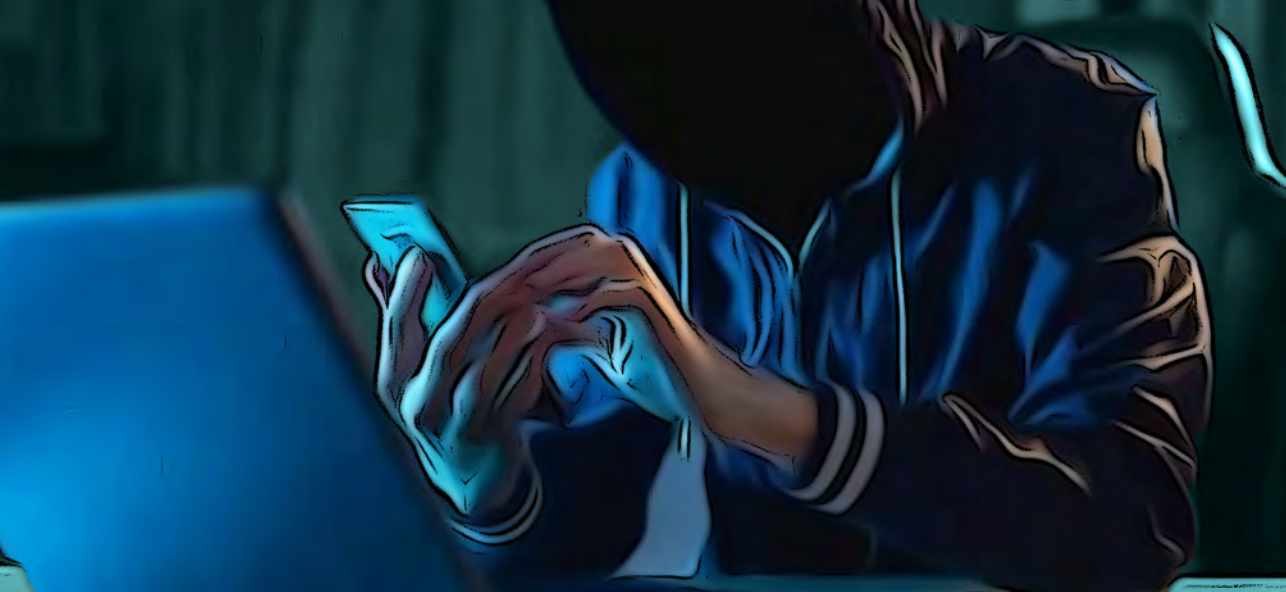
- **Unintentional Exposure to Adult Content** - A 14-year-old watching gaming videos clicked on a suggested explicit video. Repeated exposure shaped unrealistic ideas about relationships and body image.
- **Disturbing Viral Content** - A 16-year-old girl saw a violent real-life attack shared on social media. She felt anxious and afraid but kept watching due to peer pressure.
- **Online Radicalization** - A 17-year-old followed a “truth-seeking” account that gradually fed him extremist content. He adopted these views and withdrew from family and friends.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT ONLINE CONTENT

Use these questions to start a conversation about digital safety:

- **What should you do if you come across disturbing content?** - Teach your teen to close the page and talk to a trusted adult.
- **How do extremist groups attract young people online?** - Discuss their tactics, such information manipulation, secrecy, and emotional manipulation.
- **What are warning signs of a harmful online community?** - Talk about groups that promote hatred, encourage secrecy, or discourage critical thinking.
- **How can exposure to violent or explicit content affect mental health?** - Discuss desensitization, anxiety, and distorted perceptions of reality.



E. ONLINE GROOMING AND SEXTORTION

The internet provides a direct path for predators to manipulate and exploit young users, often without them realizing it. Grooming is when an adult builds trust with a teen - posing as a peer, offering emotional support, or giving gifts - to gain control and coerce them into harmful situations. In some cases, this escalates into sextortion, where a predator pressures or blackmails a teen into sharing explicit images or engaging in unwanted activities. These risks are most common on social media, gaming platforms, and private messaging apps, making parental awareness crucial.

Sextortion preys on fear and shame—let your teen know they can always turn to you, no matter what.



EXAMPLES

- **The Fake Online Boyfriend** - A 15-year-old girl trusted someone who seemed kind and supportive. After sending a private photo, he revealed his true identity and blackmailed her, leaving her feeling helpless.

- **Gaming Platform Manipulation** - A 13-year-old boy was thrilled when an older player offered him virtual rewards. Over time, the conversation turned personal, and he was pressured into sharing selfies and private details.
- **Sextortion in Private Messaging** – A 16-year-old girl was approached by someone claiming to be a talent scout. After sending photos, she was blackmailed and threatened with exposure if she didn't comply with further demands.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT ONLINE GROOMING AND SEXTORTION

Use these discussion prompts to help your teen recognize and respond to online manipulation:

- **Why do some predators pretend to be someone they're not online?** - Explain how groomers build trust to manipulate teens.
- **What are warning signs of an unsafe online conversation?** - Discuss red flags like **secrecy, personal questions, and gift offers.**
- **What should you do if someone online starts making you uncomfortable?** Encourage your child to block, report, and talk to a trusted adult without fear of punishment.
- **Why is it risky to share private photos or information online?** - Emphasize how **anything shared can be misused**, even by someone they think they trust.
- **How can you support a friend experiencing online grooming?** - Encourage seeking help and reassure them that **they are not to blame.**

The movie and campaign to the movie *V sieti:za školou* - version for young people from 12+ about online grooming can be found here: <https://vsitifilm.cz/>

The official way to report content like this in Slovakia is through webpage www.ochranma.sk



F. MANIPULATED CONTENT

The internet is full of information, but not all of it is reliable. Manipulated content - whether false, misleading, or intentionally deceptive - can shape opinions, fuel conflicts, and spread extreme ideologies. Teens are especially vulnerable to biased influencers, viral conspiracy theories, and AI-generated content designed to manipulate emotions.

Teens are constantly exposed to manipulated information—help them develop critical

For a deeper look at information manipulation, see **Chapter 4: Decoding Media**, which includes **examples, discussion prompts, and family activities** to build critical thinking skills.

As a parent, **encourage curiosity and healthy skepticism** - teach your teen to question sources, verify facts, and think critically before believing or sharing online content.



G. ONLINE SHOPPING SCAMS: PROTECTING TEENS FROM FRAUD

Online shopping offers convenience and endless choices, but it also comes with [risks - especially for young](#), inexperienced buyers. Scammers take advantage of teens through **fraudulent sellers, counterfeit products, and fake websites**, leading to financial loss, stolen personal data, or even identity theft. Many teens, eager for trendy items at low prices, may overlook warning signs, making them prime targets.



EXAMPLES

- **Too-Good-to-Be-True Deal** - A 15-year-old girl found designer sneakers at a steep discount on an unfamiliar website. After paying, the shoes never arrived, and the site disappeared.
- **Social Media Marketplace Scam** - A teen bought a second-hand gaming console from an individual seller. After making a non-refundable payment, the seller vanished.
- **Counterfeit Beauty Products** - A 16-year-old purchased a makeup product promoted by an influencer. When it arrived, it was fake and caused an allergic reaction.



HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

- **Teach Teens to Spot Red Flags** - Unrealistic prices, poor website design, or pressure to pay upfront can signal a scam.
- **Encourage Safe Payment Methods** – Debit/credit cards and secure payment platforms offer buyer protection - unlike wire transfers or gift cards.
- **Verify Sellers & Websites** - Look for verified reviews, return policies, and official brand websites before purchasing.



H. PRIVACY VIOLATIONS, DATA MISUSE AND DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

Every time teens go online - whether posting on social media, signing up for apps, or using free services - they may unknowingly share [personal data](#). **Companies, advertisers, and hackers** can collect, misuse, or sell this information, leading to **targeted ads, tracking, identity theft, or even hacked accounts**. Many teens don't realize that what they share today could impact their **future opportunities**, such as college admissions or jobs.

Once shared online, personal data can be misused - talk to your teen about thinking twice before posting.



WHAT IS A DIGITAL FOOTPRINT?

Imagine your teen applies for a university or job years from now, but an old inappropriate post or overshared personal detail surfaces in an online search. **Even deleted posts can be saved, screenshotted, or archived, leaving a lasting digital trail.** Helping teens understand that their online actions can follow them into adulthood is key to making smart choices today.



EXAMPLES

- **Social Media Data Leaks** - A teen's private messages and photos were exposed in a data breach, leading to unwanted contact.
- **Phishing Scams** - A fake email from a streaming service tricked a teen into sharing login details, leading to a hacked account.
- **Unknowingly Selling Personal Data** - A 14-year-old downloaded a free game that tracked their location and browsing habits, later sold to advertisers.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT ONLINE PRIVACY

Use these discussion prompts to guide conversations with your teen about privacy and data security:

- **What are the risks of oversharing personal information online?** Discuss how details like school names, locations, or daily routines can be used for unwanted tracking or identity theft.
- **How can you protect your online accounts from hacking?** Talk about using strong passwords, enabling two-factor authentication, and avoiding suspicious links.
- **Do you think deleting a post means it's gone forever?** Explain how screenshots, data archives, and search engines can preserve online content indefinitely.



HOW TO KEEP YOUR TEEN'S DATA SAFE

- **Adjust Privacy Settings** - Regularly review app and social media privacy settings to control who can see your teen's information.
- **Limit Personal Sharing** - Encourage teens to avoid sharing full names, locations, school details, or personal identifiers online.
- **Recognize Data Collection in Apps** - Teach them to check app permissions before installing and be cautious of apps that request excessive data access.

- **Use Secure Passwords** - Help them create strong, unique passwords and enable two-factor authentication where possible.
- **Be Aware of Scams and Phishing** - Educate them on how to spot fake emails, suspicious links, and deceptive messages designed to steal personal information.

By staying informed and taking proactive steps, parents can help their teens **navigate the digital world safely, ensuring their personal information remains protected.**



I. OVERUSE AND ADDICTION: RECOGNIZING AND MANAGING SCREEN TIME

The digital world is designed to be engaging, but for many teens, **excessive screen time can turn into a real struggle**. Social media, online gaming, and endless video content can become addictive, making it difficult to focus on school, hobbies, and real-world interactions. The constant notifications, likes, and messages trigger dopamine responses in the brain, creating a cycle of compulsive use. Over time, this can lead to **poor sleep, anxiety, irritability, and difficulty concentrating**.



EXAMPLES

- **The Late-Night Scroller** - A 15-year-old stays up until 3 AM watching videos, struggling to wake up for school.
- **Gaming Over Schoolwork** - A teen prioritizes gaming over homework and family time, feeling irritable when offline.
- **Social Media Pressure** - A 14-year-old checks their phone constantly, feeling stressed about staying connected.

More details on how to **help teens manage screen overuse** can be found in **Chapter 5: Digital Well-Being & Healthy Boundaries**.



DECODING MEDIA: ANALYZING CONTENT FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING

- 32 A. Is Media Informing or Persuading You?
- 36 B. How to Spot Clickbait and Avoid Deceptive Content
- 39 C. Identifying Reliable Sources: How to Find Trustworthy Information
- 43 D. How Cognitive Biases Influence What We See Online
- 47 E. Understanding Algorithms: How Social Media Shapes What We See
- 50 F. Evaluating Influencers: Understanding Their Impact
- 53 G. Identifying Advertisements: Recognizing Sponsored & Manipulative Content
- 55 H. Artificial Intelligence: Helps, Harms or Both?
- 58 I. Recognizing Harmful Stereotypes and Hate Speech



A. DECODING MEDIA: IS MEDIA INFORMING OR PERSUADING YOU?

Media messages are everywhere—from news articles and social media posts to advertisements and political campaigns. Every day, we encounter content that either **provides information** or **tries to persuade us** to think, feel, or act in a certain way. While some messages simply share facts, others use emotional appeals, urgency, or strong language to influence decisions.

Every media message has a purpose. Helping your teen recognize whether a message is informing or persuading empowers them to think critically and make informed.

Understanding the difference between **informing** and **persuading** is essential because media shapes how we see the world, make choices, and even develop opinions. Critical thinking—the ability to analyze and evaluate information rather than just accepting it at face value—helps us navigate this landscape. For example, a weather forecast provides factual updates to help us prepare for the day, while an advertisement for a new phone might make us feel like we need the latest model to stay ahead.

As parents and caregivers, recognizing these distinctions helps us teach our children how to **question what they see, think critically, and make informed choices**. This skill is especially important in a digital world where information spreads quickly, and not everything we see is neutral or true.



BREAKING DOWN MEDIA MESSAGES

Media content generally falls into two categories: **informative** and **persuasive**.

1. Informative Media

- The primary goal is to share **neutral, factual** information.
- Common examples include news reports, weather updates, educational articles.
Features:
 - Clear, factual language.
 - Neutral tone without emotional triggers.
 - Evidence or sources to support claims.

2. Persuasive Media

- The primary goal is to **influence opinions, emotions, or actions**.
- Common examples include advertisements, political campaigns, and opinion pieces.
Features:
 - Emotional language (e.g., “Don’t miss out on this new trend!” “You will be shocked!”).
 - Calls to action (e.g., “Sign up today!” “Buy now!”).
 - Use of persuasive techniques like testimonials, urgency, or fear appeals.

3. Overlapping Messages

Sometimes, media messages combine both elements. For example:

- A health campaign may **inform** about flu symptoms while **persuading** people to get vaccinated.
- A safety campaign may **inform** about the importance of wearing seat belts while **persuading** people to always buckle up.

- A news article may report on a political event while subtly influencing how the audience perceives it.



PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Consider these two messages about a new smartphone release:

Example 1 (Informative): “The new smartphone model features an advanced camera and longer battery life.”

- This message presents factual details without urging action.

Example 2 (Persuasive): “Are you tired of being left behind? Get the new smartphone today and stay ahead of the game!”

- This message uses emotional appeal (fear of missing out) and a call to action.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

As a parent, you can help your child identify whether media is informing or persuading them by asking simple questions:

- 1. What information is being shared?**
- 2. What action or response does the message encourage?**
- 3. Is the message using emotional triggers or urgency?**
- 4. Are there sources or evidence provided?**

Encourage discussions about media messages they see daily, such as:

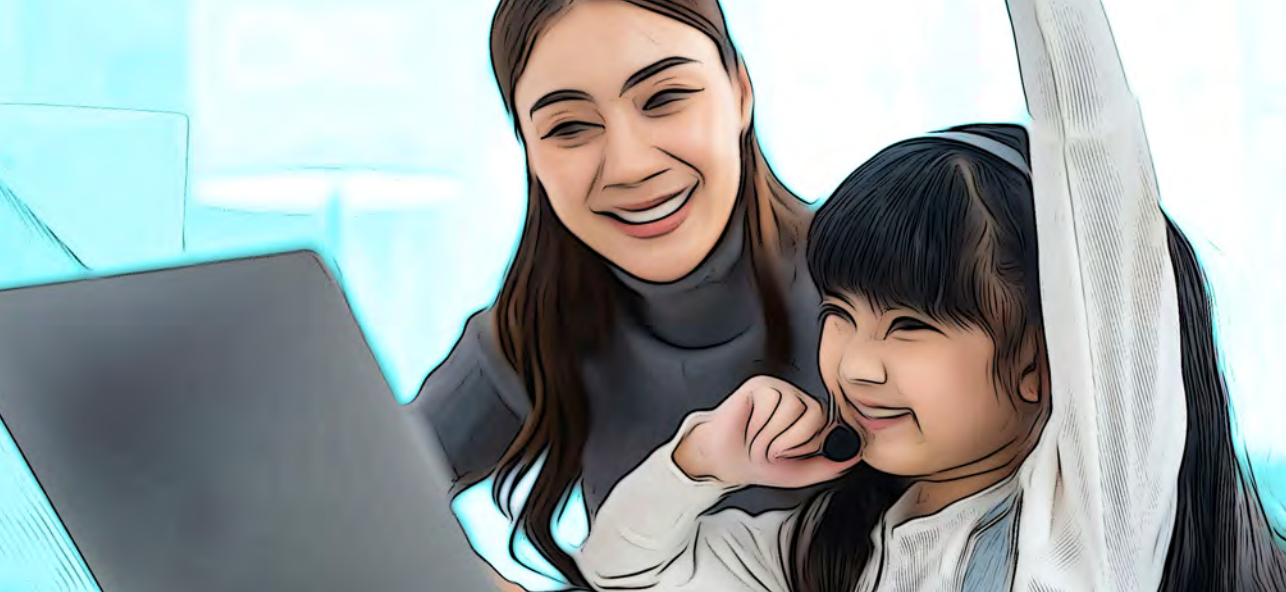
- An online advertisement: Is it factual, or does it try to persuade them to buy something?
- A social media post: Is it sharing neutral information, or does it push a specific viewpoint?

- A news headline: Does it state facts, or does it use sensational language to influence emotions?



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

- **Daily Challenge:** Ask your child to identify one media message and decide if it informs or persuades.
- **Family Discussion:** Discuss a commercial or news story together and analyze its intent.
- **Media Journaling:** Have your child track persuasive messages they encounter for a week and reflect on how they feel after seeing them.
- **Model Critical Thinking:** When reading or watching media, share your thought process aloud (e.g., “This ad makes the product sound exciting, but is it really necessary?”).



B. HOW TO SPOT CLICKBAIT AND AVOID DECEPTIVE CONTENT

Always question the headline: If it sounds too sensational or promises something too good to be true, it's likely clickbait designed to mislead.

In today's digital world, we are constantly bombarded with flashy headlines, sensational stories, and exaggerated claims. Some of these are designed to grab our attention, while others aim to mislead us for clicks, advertising revenue, or even to spread false information. This type of content is often referred to as clickbait—articles, videos, or social media posts that lure us in with shocking or emotional language, but often fail to deliver meaningful or accurate information. For example:

- A headline might claim “You Won’t Believe What Happened Next!” to encourage clicks rather than provide useful information.
- A misleading social media post may exaggerate a story to provoke outrage or excitement.
- A news article may distort facts by using selective wording to push a particular narrative.

As a parent, understanding how clickbait works can help you guide your child in recognizing misleading content and making informed decisions online. This section will provide you with practical ways to identify deceptive content, discuss real-world examples, and offer tips on how to help your child navigate the online world more critically.



PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Consider these two headlines:

Example 1 (Informative): *Scientists Discover New Planet That Could Support Life.*

- This headline provides factual information without exaggeration.

Example 2 (Clickbait): *You Won't Believe What Scientists Just Found in Space!"*

- This headline is vague, dramatic, and encourages curiosity-driven clicks without revealing clear information.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

As a parent, you can help your teen recognize and avoid clickbait by encouraging them to ask questions such as:

1. Does the headline sound overly dramatic or exaggerated?
2. Does the article deliver on what the headline promised?
3. Is the source credible and well-known?
4. Does the article provide evidence, or is it full of speculation?
5. Is the content designed to evoke a strong emotional reaction?
6. Is the content asking for shares or engagement without providing solid information?

Encourage discussions about:

- **Viral social media posts:** Are they based on facts, or are they designed to manipulate emotions?

- **Sensational news articles:** Do they use exaggerated language to attract attention?
- **Misleading ads:** Are they promising something that sounds too good to be true?
- **A YouTube video title:** Is it truthful, or is it using exaggerated claims to gain more views?



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

- **Daily Challenge:** Have your child identify one piece of clickbait they come across and explain why it is misleading.
- **Family Discussion:** Review a news article together and determine if the headline accurately represents the content.
- **Clickbait Journaling:** Have your child document instances of misleading content and reflect on how they felt after engaging with it.
- **Model Critical Thinking:** When encountering sensational headlines, talk about your thought process aloud (e.g., “This headline seems too dramatic—let’s see if the article actually provides real facts.”).



C. IDENTIFYING RELIABLE SOURCES: HOW TO FIND TRUSTWORTHY INFORMATION

In today's digital world, information is everywhere—but how can we tell which sources are trustworthy? Many people assume that if something appears online, it must be true. However, not all information is created equal. Some sources strive for accuracy and reliability, while others may be misleading, biased, or outright false. Understanding the difference is crucial in making informed decisions and teaching children to do the same.

Not all information is created equal. Teaching children to question sources, verify facts, and recognize biases empowers them to make informed decisions in a world full of manipulated information.

A reliable source is one that is based on verifiable facts, research, and expert knowledge. It avoids sensationalism, provides evidence for claims, and is transparent about where its information comes from. On the other hand, unreliable sources may rely on opinions, omit key details, or present information in a way that is designed to manipulate emotions rather than inform.

Many factors influence whether a source is credible. These include:

- **The author or organization:** Does the writer have expertise in the subject? Is the organization known for accurate reporting?
- **The purpose of the information:** Is the goal to inform, persuade, entertain, or provoke a reaction?
- **Supporting evidence:** Are claims backed by facts, studies, or expert opinions?
- **Bias and balance:** Does the source present multiple viewpoints or push a particular agenda?
- **Consistency with other trusted sources:** Can the same information be verified elsewhere?



THE PROBLEM OF FAKE EXPERTS

Not all experts are truly experts. Some individuals or organizations present themselves as authorities despite lacking proper credentials, research background, or expertise in the field they discuss. Fake experts can be particularly convincing because they use technical language, cite selective studies, or appear on reputable platforms.

Signs of a fake expert include:

- **Lack of recognized credentials** or experience in the subject matter.
- **Selective use of evidence** to support only one side of an issue.
- Frequent appearance on biased or unverified platforms.
- **Overuse of emotional arguments** rather than data-driven analysis.
- Claims that contradict the consensus of real experts in the field.



UNDERSTANDING MEDIA INFLUENCE

People often develop trust in certain sources over time, especially if they have relied on them for years. Some media outlets present themselves as neutral and authoritative, but they may selectively present information that aligns with a particular perspective. This can make it difficult to recognize gaps or biases in reporting, especially if alternative viewpoints are rarely considered.

If you have primarily relied on one type of source for news, consider exploring a variety of perspectives to ensure you are getting the full picture.



PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Consider these two news sources:

Example 1 (Reliable Source): A well-established news organization with a history of accurate reporting, proper citations, and journalistic standards.

- The article provides balanced viewpoints and references credible experts.
- The source has a reputation for fact-checking and transparency.

Example 2 (Unreliable Source): A social media post from an unknown account claiming a major event happened without citing any sources.

- The post uses dramatic language but does not provide verifiable evidence.
- There are no links to credible sources, and the author is unknown or lacks expertise.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

As a parent, you can help your teen assess the reliability of information by encouraging them to ask questions such as:

- 1. Who is the source?** Is it a well-known and reputable organization, or an anonymous account?
- 2. What is the purpose?** Is the information meant to inform, persuade, or entertain?
- 3. Is there evidence?** Does the article provide sources, links, or expert opinions?

4. Is it biased? Does the source present multiple perspectives or push one side of an issue?

5. Can the information be verified? Can other trusted sources confirm the same details?

6. Are there sensational elements? Does the title or content use overly emotional or dramatic language to get attention?



ENCOURAGE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT:

- **News Articles:** Compare coverage of the same event from different sources to identify biases.
- **Viral Social Media Posts:** Discuss how misinformation spreads quickly online and why fact-checking matters.
- **Influencers and Bloggers:** Explain that personal opinions are not always backed by facts and that popularity does not equal credibility.
- **Deepfakes and AI-Generated Content:** Talk about how technology can manipulate images and videos to appear real.



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

- **Daily Challenge:** Have your child pick a trending news story and compare how different sources report on it.
- **Fact-Checking Together:** Use fact-checking websites like [Snopes](#), [Reuters Fact Check](#), [Demagog.sk](#) or [AFP Fakty](#) to verify claims.
- **Model Critical Thinking:** Share your thought process when evaluating a source (e.g., “This article cites multiple experts, so I trust it more than an opinion piece without sources.”).



D. COGNITIVE BIASES AND DISTORTIONS

Cognitive biases are mental shortcuts our brains use to process information quickly. While these shortcuts can be helpful in many situations, they often lead us to make inaccurate judgments or decisions. For example, the availability heuristic—a type of cognitive bias—helps us make quick decisions based on readily available information. If we hear about an earthquake nearby, this bias may prompt us to take extra precautions, even though earthquakes are rare. In this case, the bias is protective, encouraging us to be alert and prepared, even when the actual risk is low.

However, when it comes to interpreting media, cognitive biases can skew our judgment. They influence how we interpret news stories, advertisements, and social media posts. For instance, we may believe something is true simply because we've heard it repeatedly, or because it aligns with our existing beliefs, even if the information isn't accurate or complete.

Cognitive distortions, meanwhile, are negative thinking patterns that shape how we view ourselves and the world. These distorted thoughts can reinforce unrealistic beliefs, limit our ability to think critically, and cloud our judgment. Without recognizing these biases and distortions, we risk being misled by what we see and hear online, making it difficult to tell fact from opinion or reality from exaggeration.



PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Let's take a look at four key cognitive biases and how they appear in the real world:

- **Anchoring Bias Example:** *A car dealer shows you a \$50,000 car first, and then offers you a \$40,000 one. You perceive this as a great deal, even though it's still expensive compared to others.*
Explanation: The first piece of information you see—whether it's a high price or a flashy claim—sets an anchor in your mind, affecting how you perceive everything that follows.
- **Confirmation Bias Example:** *A friend shares only articles supporting their political view, ignoring anything that contradicts their beliefs.*
Explanation: We tend to seek out information that confirms what we already believe and dismiss anything that challenges our perspective.
- **Halo Effect Example:** *A celebrity endorses a beauty product, making you believe it must be high quality, even without any evidence of its effectiveness.*
Explanation: Our overall impression of someone or something (like a celebrity) can influence our judgment of unrelated traits (like the quality of a product).
- **Availability Heuristic Example:** *After hearing about a plane crash on the news, you become fearful of flying, even though air travel is statistically safe.*
Explanation: We overestimate the likelihood of events based on how easily we can recall similar occurrences, especially if they are dramatic or recent.
- **Bandwagon Effect Example:** *A new fashion trend emerges, and suddenly everyone is wearing the same style, even people who initially didn't like it.*
Explanation: People tend to adopt beliefs or behaviors simply because they see many others doing the same, rather than evaluating them independently.

By recognizing these biases, we can become more critical consumers of media and avoid being manipulated by faulty thinking patterns.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

Encourage your child to pause and reflect before accepting information at face value. Here are some reflection questions and tips to guide thoughtful discussions:

Reflection Questions:

- Can you remember a time when you only looked for information that matched what you already believed? What could happen if you actively sought out different viewpoints? How might that change the way you see things?
- Do you think you're more likely to believe a story if it's shared by someone you trust, even if you haven't verified it? Why?
- How does seeing the same message repeatedly (like an ad or news story) affect your opinion of it?
- When you see an opinion online that you disagree with, how do you usually respond? Do you try to understand their perspective, or do you ignore it?
- Have you formed your opinion on the topic because you genuinely agree with it, or because many people around you seem to support it?
- Are you hesitating to question or disagree with an idea because you fear being left out or judged?



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

Make identifying biases a regular part of your family discussions:

- **Trend Tracker Challenge:** Each family member picks a recent social media trend, advertisement, or popular belief and researches whether there is any solid evidence supporting it. Then, everyone shares their findings, discussing whether the trend was influenced by the Bandwagon Effect.

- **Two-Sided Story Challenge:** Each family member selects a controversial or debated topic (e.g., screen time effects, climate change, or a sports rivalry). They must research and present both sides of the argument, regardless of their personal beliefs. After presenting, the family discusses what they learned and whether their initial opinions changed. This exercise encourages looking at multiple perspectives and recognizing confirmation bias in action.



E. UNDERSTANDING ALGORITHMS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES WHAT WE SEE

Have you ever noticed that when you watch a certain type of video online, you start seeing more videos just like it? Or when you click on a news article, similar stories seem to appear everywhere? This isn't a coincidence—it's the result of something called an **algorithm**.

What appears on our screens is carefully chosen by algorithms—complex sets of rules and calculations that decide what content we see based on our behavior. While algorithms can make it easier to find relevant and interesting content, they can also shape our opinions, reinforce biases, and limit exposure to diverse perspectives.



WHAT ARE ALGORITHMS, AND HOW DO THEY WORK?

Social media platforms use algorithms to organize and prioritize content. These systems analyze data such as:

- **What we like, comment on, or share**
- **How long we spend looking at certain posts or videos**
- **Who we interact with the most**
- **Which topics or hashtags we follow**

Based on this information, algorithms suggest more content that matches our preferences, keeping us engaged for longer periods. However, this also means that we may see only a narrow selection of viewpoints and miss out on a fuller picture of the world.



THE IMPACT OF ALGORITHMS ON WHAT WE BELIEVE

Because algorithms tailor content to our interests, they can create **filter bubbles**—digital spaces where we are mostly exposed to information that aligns with our existing beliefs. This can make it harder to encounter new perspectives or challenge misinformation. Some key effects of algorithm-driven content include:

- **Confirmation Bias** – Seeing more content that reinforces what we already believe can make us more certain of our opinions, even if they are based on incomplete or misleading information.
- **Emotional Manipulation** – Platforms prioritize content that triggers strong emotional reactions (anger, excitement, fear) because it keeps users engaged, making it easier for misinformation or extreme viewpoints to spread.
- **Personalized Reality** – Two people searching for the same topic might receive entirely different results based on their browsing history and past interactions.



PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Consider these two scenarios:

Example 1: A Balanced Feed

A teen follows a mix of news sources, fact-checking accounts, and diverse perspectives. Their algorithm recommends a variety of viewpoints, encouraging critical thinking and informed decision-making.

Example 2: A Filter Bubble

A person frequently interacts with content from only one political viewpoint. Over

time, their feed is filled exclusively with similar opinions, making it seem like everyone agrees with them, even if other perspectives exist.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

As a parent, you can help your child develop awareness of how social media algorithms shape their experiences by encouraging them to ask:

- 1. Why am I seeing this content?** Is it because of my past interactions, or is it genuinely important news?
- 2. Am I getting the full picture?** Could there be other perspectives I haven't considered?
- 3. Does this content make me feel overly emotional?** If so, is it designed to provoke a reaction rather than inform?
- 4. Have I verified this information elsewhere?** Can I find the same facts from multiple reliable sources?
- 5. Who benefits from me seeing this?** Is this post designed to sell a product, push an agenda, or keep me engaged longer?



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

- **Daily Scroll Challenge:** Have your child check their social media or YouTube recommendations and guess why specific content is being suggested. Compare results as a family to see how algorithms personalize feeds differently.
- **Algorithm Experiment:** Choose a neutral topic (e.g., space exploration, gardening) and engage with related content for a day. Observe if recommendations change and discuss how algorithms respond to viewing habits.
- **Model Awareness:** Share your thought process when engaging with online content (e.g., "I noticed I only get news from one source—I'll search for different perspectives to make sure I'm well-informed.").



F. EVALUATING INFLUENCERS: UNDERSTANDING THEIR IMPACT

In today's digital world, social media influencers have a significant impact on how we think, what we buy, and even what we believe. Many influencers build trust with their audiences through engaging content, personal storytelling, and frequent interactions. However, not everything shared online is credible or unbiased. Evaluating influencers critically helps us make informed choices about who we follow and what information we trust. By analyzing credibility, content, and potential biases, we can develop a smart approach to consuming social media content.



EXAMPLES

- **The Sponsored Post:** A fitness influencer promotes a specific protein powder, claiming it is the best on the market. However, they do not mention that they are paid by the company to promote the product.
- **The Misinformation Trend:** A popular influencer shares a health tip without scientific backing, leading thousands of followers to try an unproven remedy.
- **The Authentic Expert:** A scientist with a background in climate research shares insights about global warming, using data and sources to support their claims.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

Use these questions to guide discussions with your child about influencers:

Background and Expertise:

- What is the influencer's background?
- Do they have expertise in the field they are discussing? How do you know?
- Why do you trust or distrust certain influencers?
- What types of posts or influencers grab your attention most and why?

Content Quality:

- Is the content they share well researched and accurate? How do you know?
- Do they provide evidence or sources for their claims?
- What types of messages do they usually share?

Transparency:

- Are they transparent about sponsored content and partnerships?
- Do they disclose any conflicts of interest?
- Do you know how influencers make money, and why does that matter when evaluating their content?

Engagement and Feedback:

- How do they interact with their audience?
- Do they respond to questions and feedback from their followers?

Consistency and Behavior:

- Are they consistent in their messaging and values?
- Have they been involved in any controversies or scandals?



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

- **Family Discussion Night:** Choose an influencer your child follows and analyze their content together. Discuss credibility, sponsorships, and messaging.

- **Fact-Check Challenge:** Pick a trending social media claim and research its accuracy as a family. Compare sources and discuss findings.
- **Influencer Evaluation Game:** Ask family members to list their favorite influencers and come up with evaluation questions, such as:
 - Does the influencer disclose sponsorships?
 - What expertise do they have?
 - Is their content consistent with their values?
- **Sticky Note Reflection:** Have family members write one action step they'll take to engage with social media more critically (e.g., "I'll check sources before sharing a post"). Display these commitments as reminders.



G. IDENTIFYING ADVERTISEMENTS: RECOGNIZING SPONSORED & MANIPULATIVE CONTENT

In today's digital world, advertisements are everywhere, from social media feeds to videos and even within search results. It can sometimes be hard to tell when you're viewing an advertisement, especially when it's blended into regular content. Many ads are cleverly designed to look like regular posts or articles, making it even more important to teach children and teens how to recognize them. This skill not only helps avoid manipulative content but also empowers young people to make more informed choices about what they see online.



PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

- **Sponsored Posts on Social Media:** You're scrolling through Instagram, and you see a post that looks like it's from your favorite influencer. It's a picture of a new skincare product with a glowing review. However, the caption includes #ad or #sponsored, indicating the post is an advertisement, even though it feels like a personal recommendation.
- **Manipulative Messaging in Videos:** A YouTube video promoting a popular brand might feature a well-known influencer claiming that their life has improved dramatically because of a product. However, this content is often paid for by the brand, and the influencer may not openly acknowledge this. The message

is manipulative because it blurs the line between personal opinion and advertisement.

- **Native Ads in Articles:** You might be reading an article on a news site about health trends, only to realize halfway through that the piece is actually a sponsored advertorial. It's designed to look like an informative article, but it's pushing a particular product or service.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

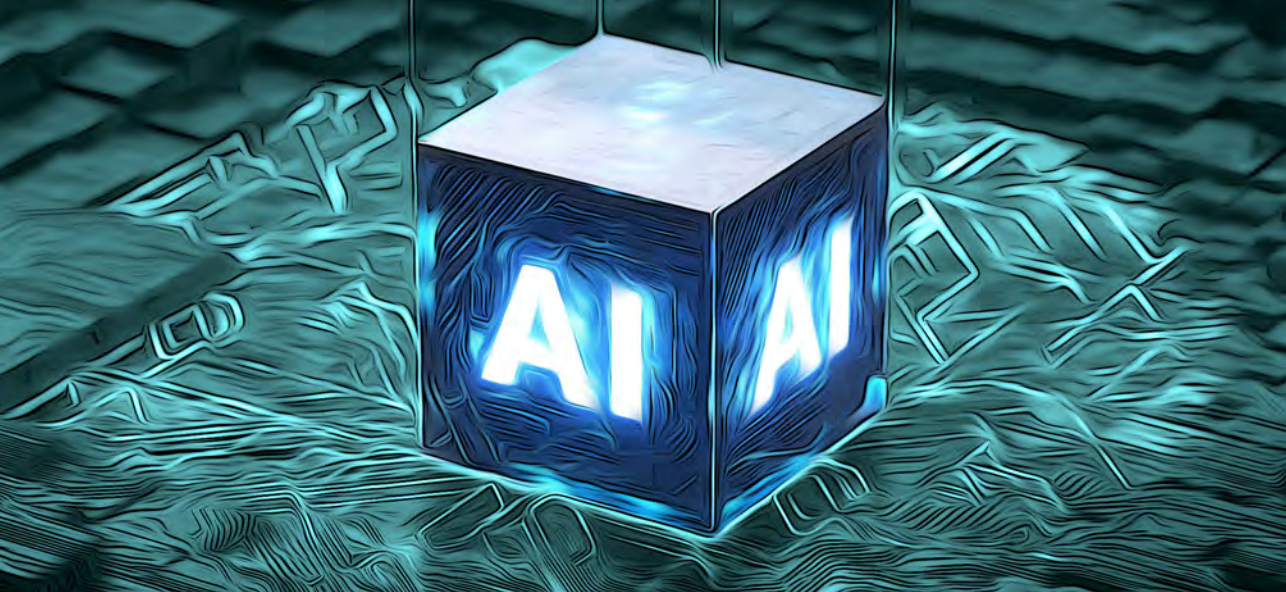
Reflection Questions:

1. How can you tell if a post or video is trying to sell something to you?
2. Have you ever wanted to buy something because an influencer or celebrity recommended it?
3. Why do you think brands use influencers or make their ads look like real content?
4. When you see an ad, what kind of feelings does it try to make you have? Does it try to make you feel happy, worried, or like you're missing out? How do you think those emotions are used to get you to buy something or believe in a product?



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

- **Ad Spotting Challenge:** As a family, scroll through social media together. See if you can spot the ads first! When you find one, pause and talk about how you can tell it's an ad (e.g., the hashtag #ad, or the way the post is trying to sell something).
- **Ad Comparison:** Choose a product that both you and your child have seen advertised (e.g., a new gaming console or clothing brand). Research how the product is marketed in different places (social media, YouTube, blogs) and discuss whether the marketing feels manipulative or informative.



H. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: HELPS, HARMS, OR BOTH?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming our digital world, influencing everything from social media recommendations to decisions in hiring, healthcare, and education. While AI enhances convenience and efficiency, it also raises concerns about bias, information manipulation, and ethical risks. As AI continues to evolve, parents and caregivers must understand both its benefits and challenges, equipping themselves and their children to navigate AI responsibly and avoid manipulation.



HOW AI WORKS

AI works by looking at large amounts of data to find patterns and make predictions. One type of AI, called machine learning, helps these systems get better over time by learning from new information. While AI can process information much faster than humans, it doesn't think or make ethical decisions like people do. That's why it's important to carefully review the content created by AI.



WHERE WE ENCOUNTER AI

AI is already present in many aspects of daily life, often in ways we don't even notice. Some examples include:

- **Virtual Assistants:** Voice-activated tools like Siri or Alexa that respond to questions and commands.
- **Streaming Recommendations:** Netflix and YouTube use AI to suggest what to watch next.
- **Social Media Filters:** Apps like Instagram and Snapchat use AI for facial recognition and augmented reality effects.
- **Automated Decisions:** AI may influence which job candidates are selected for interviews or who gets approved for a loan. AI systems can analyze resumes or job applications and automatically sort through them to find the best candidates based on certain criteria. For loan decisions, AI can analyze a person's financial history, credit score, income, and other factors to predict whether they are likely to repay a loan.
- **Deepfake Technology:** AI-generated videos or images that can manipulate reality, making it appear that someone said or did something they never actually did.



EXAMPLES OF AI BENEFITS

- **Increases Efficiency:** AI automates repetitive tasks, saving time and effort.
- **Enhances Accessibility:** Speech-to-text and translation tools help people with disabilities and language barriers.
- **Improves Personalization:** AI tailors search results, shopping suggestions, and entertainment recommendations.
- **Advances Healthcare:** AI aids in diagnosing diseases and personalizing treatment plans.



EXAMPLES OF AI RISKS AND CONCERNS

- **Algorithmic Bias:** AI systems can reflect and amplify biases present in the data they are trained on, leading to unfair decisions in hiring, policing, and lending.
- **Information Manipulation:** AI-generated deepfakes and misleading content can spread disinformation and erode trust.

- **Privacy Issues:** AI-powered surveillance and data collection can threaten individual privacy.
- **Lack of Human Oversight:** AI lacks moral reasoning, which can lead to unintended consequences when automated systems make decisions.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT AI

Here are some reflection questions and discussion prompts to help your child engage thoughtfully with AI:

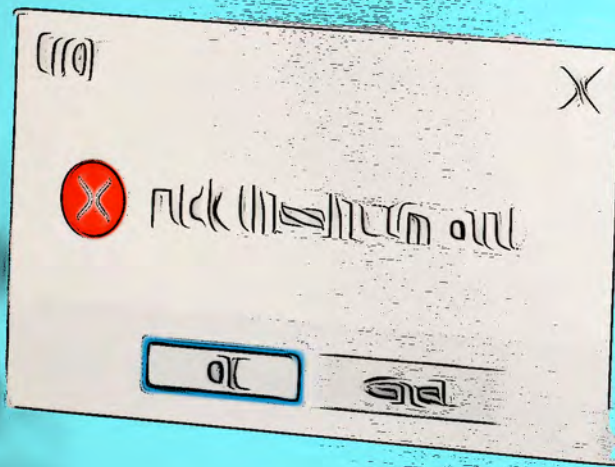
- **Can you name some apps or tools that use AI?**
- **Do you think AI always makes fair decisions? Why or why not?**
- **How can AI be helpful in daily life? How can it be harmful?**
- **What is algorithmic bias? Why might AI make unfair decisions?**
- **What could happen if AI-controlled systems are biased in important areas like education, hiring, or law enforcement?**
- **What strategies can we use to identify AI-generated content, such as deepfakes or AI-written text?**
- **Encourage teens to approach AI-generated content with a critical eye, questioning its accuracy and considering who created it and why.**



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

To foster AI literacy at home, try these simple activities:

- **Spot the AI by Playing Online AI Games:** Engage in games that help detect AI-generated images, such as “[Which Face Is Real?](#)” or Google’s “[Odd One Out.](#)”
- **AI Pros and Cons Debate:** Assign family members different roles—some arguing for AI’s benefits and others highlighting its risks. Discuss how AI might shape the future.
- **Try AI Tools Together:** Experiment with generative AI tools like ChatGPT or DALL·E and discuss their strengths and limitations.



I. RECOGNIZING HARMFUL STEREOTYPES AND HATE SPEECH

Harmful stereotypes and hate speech are pervasive issues that can negatively impact individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Stereotypes are oversimplified and often inaccurate beliefs or assumptions about people based on their race, gender, religion, or other characteristics. These false generalizations can reinforce prejudice, limit opportunities, and perpetuate discrimination. Hate speech, on the other hand, involves offensive or harmful language that targets individuals or groups based on their identity, encouraging violence, hostility, or social exclusion. Hate speech can escalate from verbal attacks to real-world harm, creating divisions and fostering an environment of fear and intolerance.

In today's digital world, where information spreads rapidly and sometimes anonymously, harmful stereotypes and hate speech are easier to encounter online. It's essential for parents and caregivers to help children recognize these harmful messages and understand their far-reaching effects. By educating children on the importance of empathy, respect, and kindness, we can empower them to identify and challenge these issues. This not only helps them make responsible decisions but also fosters an online culture that values inclusivity and understanding.

Teens, in particular, are frequent users of social media and online platforms, making it even more critical to equip them with the tools to navigate and respond to harmful content. Recognizing stereotypes and hate speech online, and knowing how to respond, will help them become responsible digital citizens who contribute positively to online spaces.



EXAMPLES

- **Stereotyping in Social Media:** A popular influencer posts a video in which they make jokes about people from a particular ethnic group, portraying them as lazy or unintelligent. This oversimplifies an entire community and reinforces negative stereotypes, encouraging others to adopt similar views.
- **Hate Speech in Online Comments:** A person posts hateful comments on a social media platform targeting a group based on their religion or sexual orientation. The comments may contain offensive language and call for harm or exclusion, which can incite fear and perpetuate harmful beliefs about that group.
- **Gender Stereotyping in Advertisements:** An advertisement for a toy promotes it as suitable only for boys, while another toy is marketed exclusively to girls, reinforcing outdated gender stereotypes and limiting the way children perceive themselves and others.



HELPING YOUR CHILD THINK CRITICALLY

Questions for Discussion:

- Have you seen a stereotype or hate speech online? How did it make you feel?
- Why do you think people might post or share harmful content?
- What are some of the negative effects that harmful stereotypes or hate speech can have on a person or a group?
- If you see something harmful online, what are some ways you can respond that would help create a better environment for everyone?

Tips for Encouraging Critical Thinking:

- Teach your child to question content that feels unfair or overly generalized. Encourage them to ask, “Is this really true?”
- Help your child understand that stereotypes are often based on incomplete or false information and can harm individuals and communities.
- Discuss the difference between free speech and hate speech. Explain that while everyone has the right to express opinions, hate speech crosses the line **by promoting harm or discrimination**.
- Encourage your child to empathize with others who may be targeted by hate speech or stereotypes. Help them see the person behind the online content, and remind them that everyone deserves respect.



MAKING MEDIA AWARENESS A FAMILY HABIT

- **Family Movie Night with a Twist:** After watching a movie or TV show, discuss any stereotypes or offensive language you noticed. Were certain characters portrayed in a way that might be harmful or unfair? What could have been done differently to represent them more positively?
- **Role-Playing Responses:** Practice role-playing situations where someone encounters hate speech or a stereotype, either in person or online. Discuss the best ways to respond respectfully, such as reporting harmful content, offering support to the person targeted, or simply standing up for what’s right.
- **Social Media Check-In:** Regularly review social media posts and messages together as a family. Discuss the tone and language used in various posts. Is the content respectful and inclusive? What should be done if someone encounters harmful content? Encourage your child to think critically about what they see and share.

By making media awareness a family habit, you can help your child develop a strong sense of responsibility and empathy when interacting online. This will not only empower them to address harmful stereotypes and hate speech but also equip them with the tools to create a more positive digital space for everyone.



DIGITAL WELL-BEING & HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

- 62 A. Teens & Tech: Encouraging Digital Wellness Without Power Struggles
- 64 B. Less Screen Time: Creating Shared Family Experiences



A. TEENS & TECH: ENCOURAGING DIGITAL WELLNESS WITHOUT POWER STRUGGLES

Setting screen time boundaries can easily turn into power struggles. But the key to **healthy digital habits isn't control - it's connection**. When teens feel heard and respected, they're more open to discussions about balance and boundaries. Instead of focusing solely on limits, guide them toward digital wellness - helping them recognize how screen time impacts their **how their digital habits impact their mental and emotional well-being**. Teach them to identify signs of digital fatigue, online toxicity, and unhealthy comparisons, and empower them to take breaks when needed.



WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Start with Conversation, Not Control:** Approach the topic with curiosity. Ask open-ended questions (*e.g., What do you think would be a fair approach to managing screen time in our family? or How do you feel after spending a long time online?*) and listen. When teens feel heard, they are more likely to engage in setting healthy limits.
- **Make It a Family Effort:** Set family-wide agreements on screen time. When everyone follows the same guidelines, they feel fair rather than restrictive. Instead of rigid restrictions, create screen time guidelines together, focusing on quality over

quantity. Establish device-free moments - during meals, before bed, or on family outings - to improve focus and connection.

- **Mindful Consumption:** Help teens recognize when tech serves them (learning, connecting, creating) versus when it drains them (endless scrolling, comparison, negativity). Encourage teens to use technology for creativity, problem-solving, and meaningful interactions rather than passive consumption.

By prioritizing connection, parents create a space where teens learn to self-regulate, make mindful choices, and develop lifelong digital wellness habits—without the constant battles.



B. LESS SCREEN TIME: CREATING SHARED FAMILY EXPERIENCES

Helping teens balance screen time isn't just about setting limits - it's about offering engaging real-world experiences that feel fun, not forced. Instead of restricting devices, focus on making offline time fulfilling and enjoyable as a family. Involve teens in the planning process so activities feel like shared experiences, not forced alternatives to screens.

- **Weekend Adventures:** Go on nature walks, hikes, or city explorations. Plan road trips, visit museums, or try camping for a change of pace.
- **Creative & Hands-On Projects:** Cook a new recipe together, start a DIY craft, build a family garden, or create photo and video projects.
- **Game Nights & Friendly Competitions:** Play board games, solve escape room challenges, or set up mini sports tournaments like basketball or frisbee. Try puzzles or LEGO challenges for a fun mental workout.
- **Meaningful Traditions & Rituals:** Establish weekly family nights for movies, storytelling, or cooking. Volunteer together at a community event, food bank, or animal shelter.

- **Learn & Grow Together:** Take a class as a family - pottery, dance, coding, or photography. Try a new sport like rock climbing, skiing, or martial arts.

When family time is engaging and meaningful, digital habits naturally fall into balance - without conflict or resistance. Screens become just one part of a well-rounded life, not the center of it.



FINAL TIPS & RESOURCES

67 A. Key Takeaways for Parents

69 B. Where to Learn More



A. KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PARENTS

Raising teens in the digital age is about staying engaged, building trust, and leading by example. Here's what matters most:

- **Stay Involved** - You don't need to be a tech expert, but knowing your teen's favorite apps and online habits helps you guide them effectively.
- **Build Trust First** - Conversations about screen time and online safety work best when they feel collaborative, not like a lecture.
- **Teach Critical Thinking** - Help teens question online content, recognize manipulative information, and resist unrealistic beauty standards.
- **Set Healthy Boundaries Together** - Create shared screen time rules, like device-free meals and bedtime routines.
- **Model Balance** - Show healthy tech habits by limiting your own screen use and prioritizing face-to-face interactions.
- **Encourage Offline Activities** - Support hobbies, outdoor time, and family traditions that reduce digital dependence.

- **Keep Communication Open** - Let your teen know they can come to you with online concerns without fear of punishment.

By staying engaged, setting thoughtful boundaries, and fostering open conversations, you empower your teen to navigate the digital world with confidence and balance.



B. WHERE TO LEARN MORE

Staying informed is essential for helping your teen navigate the digital world safely and responsibly. Below are some valuable resources that can be useful parents and caregivers.



1. ONLINE SAFETY & DIGITAL WELL-BEING

- **Zodpovedne.sk** (www.zodpovedne.sk) - A Slovak initiative providing resources on online safety, cyberbullying, and responsible digital behavior.
- **Bezpečne na nete** (www.bezpecnenanete.sk) - A website dedicated to internet safety, privacy protection, and cybercrime prevention in Slovakia.
- **EU Kids Online Slovakia** (www.eukidsonline.net) - Research on children's internet use, risks, and opportunities in Slovakia.
- **Bud' safe online** (<https://www.avast.com/sk/besafeonline/>) - online courses about online safety, cyberbullying, and responsible digital behavior.
- **Bezpečný internet** (<https://bezpecnyinternet.nks.gov.sk/>) - Národné koordinačné stredisko pre riešenie problematiky násilia na deťoch
- **INHOPE/ochranma.sk** - online reporting for illegal and harmful content.



2. FACT-CHECKING

- **Konšpirátori.sk** (www.konspiratori.sk) - A database that evaluates the credibility of news sources to help users identify misinformation.
- **Demagog.sk** (www.demagog.sk) - A fact-checking platform analyzing political statements and media claims.
- **Infosecurity.sk** (www.infosecurity.sk) - Articles and research on disinformation, media manipulation, and online security.
- **Hoaxy a podvody** – (<https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=hoaxy%20a%20podvody>) Facebook page dedicated to debunking online hoaxes and scams.
- **AFP Fakty** (<https://fakty.afp.com/list>) – A fact-checking initiative by Agence France-Press (AFP) that debunks misinformation and false claims, with a focus on global and regional issues, including Slovakia.
- **Snopes** (www.snopes.com) – A global fact-checking website that investigates information manipulation across various topics, including politics, health, and social media trends.



3. MENTAL HEALTH & DIGITAL WELLNESS

- **IPčko.sk** (www.ipcko.sk) – A confidential online counseling service for young people facing mental health challenges, including those related to online stress and cyberbullying.
- **Liga za duševné zdravie** (www.dusevnezdravie.sk) – Resources on mental well-being, including support for digital addiction and screen time balance.
- **YouthWellbeing.sk** (www.youthwellbeing.sk) – Information on mental health, self-esteem, and the impact of social media on young people.
- **Viac ako nick** - (www.viacakonick.gov.sk) - Národná linka na pomoc deťom v ohrození VIAC AKO NI(c)K - National helpline for kids



4. PRIVACY, DATA PROTECTION & ONLINE SCAMS

- **Úrad na ochranu osobných údajov SR** (www.dataprotection.gov.sk) – Slovakia's data protection authority, offering guidance on personal data security.
- **Slovak Banking Association – Online Fraud Prevention** (www.sbaonline.sk) – Tips for avoiding online scams, fraudulent transactions, and identity theft.
- **Európske spotrebiteľské centrum Slovensko** (www.esc-sr.sk) – Consumer protection advice, including information on fraudulent online shopping and scams.



5. PARENTAL CONTROLS & DIGITAL PARENTING TOOLS

- **Google Family Link** (<https://families.google/familylink/>) – Helps parents manage screen time, app usage, and privacy settings on their child's device.
- **Apple Screen Time** (support.apple.com/screen-time) – Guides on how to monitor and limit screen time on Apple devices.
- **Better Internet for Kids (BIK)** (www.betterinternetforkids.eu) – A European initiative with resources on online safety and digital parenting.
- **INHOPE/ochranma.sk** – online reporting for illegal and harmful content.

Návody na nastavenie rodičovskej kontroly:

Google, Android

<https://support.google.com/googleplay/answer/1075738?hl=sk>

iPhone a iPad

<https://support.apple.com/sk-sk/105121>

ESET

https://help.eset.com/eis/17/sk-SK/idh_page_setting_parental.html

Ako si skontrolujem koľko času trávim ja alebo dieťa na telefóne:

- iPhone: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUxn-piAYsU>
- Android: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7POXln09rF4>

Staying informed is key to guiding your teen in making smart, safe, and balanced online choices. These resources provide valuable information to help you support your teen's digital journey with confidence.