We are BIG on SAFETY:
How to stay safe in a Virtual World

There is a lot going on in our world right now that has forced a lot of our communication to be through online platforms. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, guardian, or Big (mentor) of a youth in your life, it is important to stay informed and know how to keep them safe. At Big Brothers Big Sisters, safety is our number one priority. (https://www.bbbsky.org/safety-within-a-match.html)

Many families are experiencing several different challenges right now as we face a global pandemic. Not only are we learning how to stay healthy during COVID-19, you may also be running a school out of your dining room, learning how to work with your spouse a few feet away from you at all times, and taking care of your dog that now gets to have their humans home all day long. Due to all these changes, it has been found that youth are now spending 50% more time on screens. Now more than ever, it is important that we have some difficult, but important conversations about how to stay safe online. This website has put together some helpful tips for parents (https://www.thorn.org/blog/keeping-your-kids-safe-online-in-the-age-of-covid-usable-tips-for-parents):

1) **Ask your child to teach you about their favorite apps-** For children that have their own devices, this is the perfect time to ask about the apps and games they use the most. But don't stop there: take it a step further and let your kids actually show you how to download and use their favorite apps and games.
2) **Participate in online trends with your kids-** Ask your kids about the viral challenges they're seeing on TikTok and which one you can do together. That might mean acting a bit silly or feeling a little awkward at first, but it's both great bonding time and an opportunity to learn more about the platform.
3) **Talk to your kids about sharing content-** This conversation can be uncomfortable and awkward. Thankfully, StopSextortion.com has some excellent resources for caregivers on how to start the conversation.
4) **Make sure classroom video meetings and peer video chats are secure-** Schools are doing an exceptional job pivoting to remote learning, but with so much going on it can be easy to miss some key steps in keeping everything secure. And some companies have been caught off guard by the massive increase in users which have in turn exposed security flaws.
5) **Start the conversation wherever you're most comfortable, but start it!-** Online safety is an ongoing conversation that will likely change and grow as quickly as your kids. It's not always easy to broach these topics, but starting wherever you are most comfortable and taking it in steps can help.

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CYBERBULLYING:

Many of the youth we serve at Big Brothers Big Sisters have stated that they have faced some form of bullying in their school setting. As students stay home and become physically isolated from their school friends because of coronavirus, we know that the use of online platforms have increased. According to the Israeli startup L1ght, which tracks online hate speech and harassment, there has been a 70% increase in the amount of bullying among teens and children in the past month. The following information was provided by https://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/prevention.

Warning Signs a Child is Being Cyberbullied or is Cyberbullying Others:

Many of the warning signs that cyberbullying is occurring happen around a child's use of their device. Some of the warning signs that a child may be involved in cyberbullying are:

- Noticeable increases or decreases in device use, including texting.
- A child exhibits emotional responses (laughter, anger, upset) to what is happening on their device.
- A child hides their screen or device when others are near, and avoids discussion about what they are doing on their device.
- Social media accounts are shut down or new ones appear.
- A child starts to avoid social situations, even those that were enjoyed in the past.
- A child becomes withdrawn or depressed, or loses interest in people and activities.

What to Do When Cyberbullying Happens:

If you notice warning signs that a child may be involved in cyberbullying, take steps to investigate that child's digital behavior. Cyberbullying is a form of bullying, and adults should take the same approach to address it: support the child being bullied, address the bullying behavior of a participant, and show children that cyberbullying is taken seriously. Because cyberbullying happens online, responding to it requires different approaches. If you think that a child is involved in cyberbullying, there are several things you can do:

- Notice – Recognize if there has been a change in mood or behavior and explore what the cause might be. Try to determine if these changes happen around a child's use of their digital devices.
- Talk – Ask questions to learn what is happening, how it started, and who is involved.
- Document – Keep a record of what is happening and where. Take screenshots of harmful posts or content if possible. Most laws and policies note that bullying is a repeated behavior, so records help to document it.
- Report – Most social media platforms and schools have clear policies and reporting processes. If a classmate is cyberbullying, report it the school. You can also contact app or social media platforms to report offensive content and have it removed. If a child has received physical threats, or if a potential crime or illegal behavior is occurring, report it to the police.
- Support – Peers, mentors, and trusted adults can sometimes intervene publicly to positively influence a situation where negative or hurtful content posts about a child. Public Intervention can include posting positive comments about the person targeted with bullying to try to shift the conversation in a positive direction. It can also help to reach out to the child who is bullying and the target of the bullying to express your concern. If possible, try to determine if more professional support is needed for those involved, such as speaking with a guidance counselor or mental health professional.

Additional Resources:

https://www.bbbsky.org/safety-within-a-match.html
https://www.thorn.org/blog/keeping-your-kids-safe-online-in-the-age-of-covid-usable-tips-for-parents/
https://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/prevention
https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/keep-your-child-safe-online-at-home-covid-19
https://www.familyeducation.com/entertainment-activities/internet-safety