

A Short Guide for Parents and Caregivers on Helping Boys Navigate Harmful Online Influences

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This guide aims to help parents keep boys safe and respectful in online spaces.

This short guide focuses on online content and behaviors that teach boys to disrespect or harm others—e.g., sexist jokes, bullying, pressure for sexual images, and violent or degrading sexual content. But don't panic if your teen is online a lot: Use the following tips and strategies to focus on what he sees, who he follows, and how he acts.



Warning signs: What to watch for

- Calling harassment “just a joke”
- Sharing or saving sexual memes or images—especially without consent
- Frequent violent sexual content in his feed or saved items
- Praising influencers who insult women or push control over women
- Homophobic or sexist teasing; group shaming or mocking of an individual (pile-ons) in chats with multiple members

Key Terms:

Feed: The stream of posts or videos and app displays.

How the feed decides: The app learns from what you watch, click, follow, and share, and uses this information to show you more of what keeps your attention.

Consent: Defined as a clear “yes”; no image or message gets shared without a clear yes.

Upstander: Someone who takes safe action when they see harm; opposite of bystander.



5 strategies to model respectful online behavior

1. Model and name respect—every day.

- Call disrespectful behaviors out right away: “That’s harassment, not a joke.”
- Use consent language daily: “We ask. We listen. We stop.”
- Repair damage when you miss the mark: “I shouldn’t have said that—sorry.”

2. Teach and tune boys’ social media feeds.

- Explain simply: “Your feed learns from what you watch and click.”
- Act as a co-pilot of your child’s online activities for five minutes: unfollow/mute what drags him down; follow three accounts that build him up.
- Use tools together: Model how to use “Not interested or “Don’t recommend” features and keyword filters, as well as how to block and report when needed.

How feeds work (30-second explainer parents can teach)

- Apps try to guess what will grab attention. They learn from watch time, likes, comments, follows, and even slow scrolling.
- If you pause on hostile or sexual content, the app may show more like it. If you skip it fast, you get less of it.
- You can push back: Tap “Not interested/Don’t recommend,” unfollow or mute, block words (keyword filters), and follow different content creators.
- Sit together for five minutes and ask: “What is your page teaching about friendship, dating, and consent?”

3. Promote pause-before-sharing content from others (2-minute habit).

- Encourage your child to ask: “Who made this? What’s the source? Why am I sharing it?”
- Instruct them: “If you wouldn’t say it in front of a teacher or grandma, don’t post it.”

4. Create simple routines that stick.

- Digital sunset: 30–60 minutes device-free before bed
- No phones in bedrooms overnight; charge in a common spot
- Device-free meals for everyone
- Focused homework: phone out of reach; only needed online tabs; short, planned breaks

5. Grow upstander muscles (not bystander).

- Learn about and practice the “5 D’s” of upstander behavior (Direct, Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay). Check out this blog from Child Trends and the [bystander guide](#) from Right To Be.
- Low-stakes practice ideas: Send a supportive direct message, report quietly, and post one kind comment.



Quick scripts for talking to boys

When a “joke” crosses the line: “We don’t put people down for laughs. Try again.”

On consent: “No image or message gets shared without a clear yes.”

On feeds: “If your page keeps showing hostile stuff, let’s teach it what you want. I’ll watch while you hit ‘Not interested’ and unfollow a few.”

On sexting pressure: Encourage your child to reply back, “I don’t do that. Please stop.”



What to do if something goes wrong (image sharing, threats)

1. Document: Take screenshots, note dates and usernames.
2. Block and report: You can document and report in-app and should report at school if classmates are involved.
3. You can remove minors’ images from participating platforms using the [National Center for Missing Exploited Children \(NCMEC\) - Take It Down](#) service.
4. Report suspected online child sexual exploitation through the [NCMEC CyberTipline](#).
5. During active sextortion incidents (a request for sexually explicit material followed by a demand for money), follow [Federal Bureau of Investigation guidance](#).
6. Care for your teen: Thank them for telling you. Avoid blaming. Make a plan together.



Want to learn more?

The information in this guide is part of a larger series on supporting safe, healthy relationships in teens’ digital lives. Other resources from this series include:

- [Helping Boys Navigate Harmful Online Influences](#): This brief provides more details about the research and strategies that informed this short guide.
- [5 Ways to Help Boys Use Tech Respectfully](#): This short blog provides additional information about the steps you can take.
- [Talking to Boys About Pornography Can Support Healthy Relationships and Prevent Violence](#): This resource provides information on why you should talk to boys about pornography, how to start the conversation, and what to say.
- [Guidance for Parents on Encouraging Boys to Be Upstanders Against Harmful Behavior](#): This practice guide provides more information about how you can encourage your boy to safely be an upstander.

Also check additional tips from [Know2Protect](#) and the [American Psychological Association](#).



Bottom line

Most boys use technology with good intentions. Clear rules, small daily habits, and open talk keep online harm from becoming real-world harm. You can help!

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