



CANADA'S CENTRE  
FOR DIGITAL AND  
MEDIA LITERACY

## Communicating Safely Online: Tip Sheet for Youth

For most of us, digital devices like phones, tablets and computers are a big part of how we keep in touch with our friends and families. It's important to know that some relationships we have online may not be good for us.

### a. Types of Unhealthy Online Relationships

Exploitation: Some people use digital media to get teenagers involved in relationships they're not ready for. They do this by finding someone who is vulnerable and then showering them with attention, sympathy, affection and kindness, all to persuade the victim that they love and understand them.

Abuse: Relationship abuse is when someone hurts, insults or scares their partner, tries to control what they do, pressures them to do things they don't want to do or tries to keep them away from their friends and family. Some of the ways that relationship violence can happen online is by harassing someone with threatening or sexual texts and posts; "stalking" someone online; constantly keeping tabs on what someone is doing online as well as calling/emailing/texting them to "check up" on them; making someone "unfriend" past boyfriends or girlfriends; pressuring someone for sexual photos; spreading lies or rumours; sharing sexual or embarrassing things, like photos; spying on someone's calls or posts; or threatening to do any of these.

### b. Facts About Unhealthy Online Relationships

Most of the time, people who exploit teens online don't pretend to be anyone they're not, and they don't hide what they're doing. A lot of the time they are not "strangers" but people you already know offline who use digital tools to contact you privately.

Not all abusive relationships are violent. Things like scaring someone, making them feel badly all the time, cutting them off from their friends and family, humiliating them by exposing private or sexual material, or keeping tabs on them all the time are still abuse.

Just over half of girls report being victims of an abusive relationship, with 42% of boys reporting the same. Abusive online relationships are usually just part of an offline relationship, but because lots of teens are connected to their online social worlds 24/7 this can make it easier for abusers to keep tabs on a victim and make the victim feel like there's no way for them to get away.

At the beginning of an abusive relationship, a lot of abusers will ask their victim to give them things like their passwords or sexual photos to show that they love and trust them. These are the same things they'll use to control or punish their victims later.



### c. What to Do If You're in an Unhealthy Relationship

Remember that romantic or sexual relationships between teens and adults are never a good idea. Teens aren't able to consent to sex with adults, and no healthy adult seeks out relationships with teens.

When you're talking to someone online, watch out for signs that they're grooming you for a sexual relationship:

- excessively flattering you, especially about how you look
- suggesting that you move the conversation to private messaging or to a private online space
- asking about times and places where you could meet or could communicate online in private
- introducing sex or sexual topics into the conversation
- sharing or offering to share sexual images, either pornography or pictures of themselves
- asking you not to tell your parents or friends about a conversation or about the relationship

If any of those happen, make up an excuse to get out of the conversation and tell your parents or another adult that you trust right away.

If you're in an abusive relationship, help is available. Although it is can be hard, you can talk to friends, parents, teachers, or other adults you trust. If your partner has threatened violence, either online or offline, tell a trusted adult about contacting the police.

If there's nobody you can or want to talk to in person, you can call a helpline like Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868) or visit their website (<http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/>).

Don't make excuses for an abusive partner because they "aren't like that all the time."

If you're thinking about sharing sexual photos or videos with anyone online, you should know that they might make a copy and could share it later. This happens a lot. But remember that **nothing you have done ever** gives someone the right to abuse you, even if you did send them a photo or video or gave them your password.

If someone does share a sexual photo or video of you, or just an embarrassing one, check out the tip sheet: [Help! Someone Shared an Image of Me Without My Consent](#).

About a quarter of teens who are in abusive relationships are both victims and abusers. Just because an abusive relationship goes both ways doesn't mean you're not a victim – and being a victim doesn't make it okay to abuse somebody else.

If you're being abusive to your partner, you can get help too. A lot of people who abuse their partners can learn ways to control their behaviour and have healthier relationships.

One helpful guideline to follow all the time is: never post, forward or reply to something when you're mad. Take some time to cool down first.

A lot of boys say they feel pressured by their friends to do things that are abusive, like sharing sexual photos their partners sent them. It can be hard to stand up to this pressure, but you have to think about how much giving in could hurt you and your partner. **It is never okay** to share a personal or embarrassing picture of someone without their permission.



#### d. What Friends and Bystanders Can Do

Friends and bystanders can be really important in helping to keep people out of an unhealthy relationship or help them get out of one. Here are some things you can do:

If you think a friend is getting involved in an unhealthy relationship – as a victim, an abuser, or both – talk to them about it. If that doesn't help, you can talk to a parent, a teacher or another adult you trust.

Don't be part of the abuse by forwarding or sharing any embarrassing or sexual material that's being spread around. Sending a "nude" or "sext" to someone who wants to receive one isn't illegal, but sharing a sext someone sent you is, unless they gave you permission to do it. More importantly, it's wrong. Just because other people have shared a picture, that doesn't mean it's okay for you to share it.

Call people out when they say or do things that make it seem like relationship violence is okay or like someone may have "deserved" to be a victim. Sending someone a sexual photo does **not** mean it's okay to share or send it to other people.

