

Conversation Starters for Families of Tweens and Teens

Having conversations with tweens and teens about technology and digital media can be challenging. For busy families, it can feel hard to find the right moment, or to say the right things. This resource provides ideas and examples that you, as parents and guardians, can use to frame conversations with your tweens and teens around common scenarios involving technology, social media, and video games. It is intended for use with tweens and teens who already are engaged with technology and digital media.

Below are questions and prompts that you can use with your child to get their input, make decisions together, and have conversations rather than lectures. It's normal for parents to feel stressed during these conversations, so it is ok to pause or take some breaths if you need to, and remember not to jump in and try to control things. Having conversations "early and often" is preferable to planning and structuring one long talk. While there is no perfect time to have these discussions the table below gives some ideas for timing to consider and timing to avoid.

Potential times for conversations

- When driving your child to or from activities and you have some alone time with them in the car
- During a family dinner so other family members can be part of the discussion
- During downtime at home
- After your child shared something that happened at school or with peers related to these topics

Times to avoid these conversations

- When there is a tight timeline or limited time for the conversations (e.g. When you have 10 minutes before the dentist appointment starts)
- During or just after a conflict related to technology and digital media
- When your child's friends are around

Setting initial boundaries around technology and digital media use

"I'd like us to talk about our family's approach for setting some boundaries around technology and media use. I was thinking that this is something we could work on together as I'd like to include your input in these decisions."

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"Are there times of the day that you think we should not use devices or phones?
One example may be during family dinner."

"Are there times that are important to you for *me* to be present and not on a device or phone?"

"Digital media is fun and a learning opportunity, but it can also be a lot to handle. You and I are both learning about this together. I want you to know I'm here to help you through any situation that may come up. I'd like to keep an eye on a few things for now, like your sleep and whether you are seeing things or having experiences that stress you out."

"I'd like for us to talk about your device and internet use regularly; that way we can check in with each other and see how it's working for you and for us. I'm thinking for now let's touch base every other month or so, what do you think? When would be a good time to check in?"

"Since a lot of the time when you're on your phone, you're doing it by yourself, I'll be checking in with you about how it's going. It's important for you to feel comfortable talking to me in honest ways about this."

"I'd like to be sure that any discussions we have about rules or guidelines also apply to me and my own tech use. We can use the [Family Media Plan](#) tool from the AAP to get some ideas for approaches and guidelines for both/all of us. Let's take a look and see if it is helpful to us."

Initial check-ins after setting guidelines and boundaries

"It's been about a month since we set our guidelines around technology and digital media. I wanted to check in on how things are going."

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"What's working well?"

"What is not going as well as you hoped?"

"What could I be doing better in role modeling technology use?"

"Let's take a look at the guidelines we set up in the [Family Media Plan](#), and we can discuss if anything needs to be changed at this point. You can also give me feedback on how I'm doing with these rules."

Social media specific check-ins

"I know that social media is important to you. I wanted to check in about it; how do you think things are going with your social media use?"

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"What are some of the things you've enjoyed about having this social media account? What are the downsides? Is there anything you want to change? Why?"

"I don't know much about this social media platform. Can you show me a little bit about how it works, or what you like to look at on this one?"

"I understand that what you follow has a big impact on what you see when you are on that app. How do you decide who or what to follow on your profile? Do you ever think about unfollowing accounts when you don't like the content they show you? Why or why not?"

"Have you noticed whether you feel drawn to using social media during the day or at night? Anything stand out to you?"

"Have you noticed times when it's harder to get off social media. Why do you think so? What helps you get off it?"

"What's something that's surprised you about using social media so far? Was it good or bad? How about something you expected to experience — has it been what you thought it would be? Why?"

"Have you experienced any unexpected or unpleasant situations since you've gotten your account? What was that like for you?"

"It sounds like you made a great decision with how to handle that. Did anything surprise you about what happened? Would you do something similar if this happens again? Or, would you do something different?"

Checking in on unwanted contact

"One aspect of social media use that is really important is protecting our privacy. Have you looked at the privacy settings on all of your accounts? How are things going with those settings?"

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"Have people tried to contact you who you didn't know?"

"Do you know how to block someone online if they contact you or make you feel uncomfortable? Can we look together and figure out how?"

"It is unfortunately common that people online can pretend to be people they are not. This happens online and on social media or gaming platforms. Sometimes adults pretend to be teens to try to get something from them, like a sexy picture. I want you to know if anything like that ever happened to you, I would want to support you. I would be there to help you figure out a solution. I want you to be really careful with your privacy and who you share information with, but most importantly I want you to know we are here to support you no matter how bad a situation may be."

"I am guessing that you probably know about this, but there are some people who use online platforms to bully or harass others. Has anything like that ever happened to you? How did you handle it? How can I support you?"

Checking in on unwanted content

"As you probably know, your social media platforms track your search and viewing patterns. They try to get to know you, and an algorithm (a set of rules that rank content across the platform) decides what to put in your feed. How is the algorithm working for you at this point? Is there content you don't want to see? Can we look at ways to reset your algorithm?"

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"It's really normal to see some content that is creepy, upsetting, or that you don't want to see online, or via social media or gaming. Have you had any of these experiences that you are comfortable sharing? In thinking back on these situations, are there ways that you handled them that you feel good about? Things you would do differently? How can I support you?"

Struggles with meeting family expectations around digital media use

"I feel like it's a good time for us to check in on how our family media expectations are going. How are we all doing with using our devices? I've noticed a few times that I've needed to remind you about our agreement to not have devices at the dinner table so we can spend time together (*or other area that is a struggle*). What ideas do you have to make that rule work better for you? What would work about that plan and what wouldn't?"

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"What is that like for you?"

"How am I doing with role-modeling that boundary?"

"How do you feel like you're doing role-modeling for your siblings?"

"How can we support you following that rule?"

"What should our next steps be?"

Tween/teen gaming too much

"Let's talk about gaming. I'd like to share a few things I've noticed about your gaming behaviors, and then hear from you. My goal is for us to get on the same page about this."

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"You seem to get upset when I try to get you to stop playing video games and [come to dinner/go to bed/do homework/do chores/etc]. What's going on in those moments for you?"

"What sort of things make it hard to stop gaming?" — *explore wanting to be on at the same time as friends, designs of games, wanting to de-stress, avoidance of homework or family chores.*

"It sometimes feels like gaming is a distraction from some things stressing you out at school. That makes sense. I also sometimes find after a hard day at work that scrolling on my phone can feel good in the moment/distract me from work I have to do/etc. While gaming sometimes is one way to help, as your parent, I want to help you figure out other ways you can deal with stress or relax. Let's see if, together, we can come up with any ideas."

Media and technology interfering with sleep

"Sleep is really important for everyone. I know you aren't able to show up to [x] activity/have the energy to do all the things you want to do/etc. when you don't get enough sleep. Let's talk about some ideas for how to help you get better sleep."

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"I've heard you say you're feeling really tired this week. How is it going with putting your phone away at [x] time?"

"Let's come up with a plan that would help you feel more rested."

"What about keeping your phone away from your bed since it can interfere with sleeping? What other ideas do you have to calm down before you go to sleep?"

"I know that you use a calming app to go to sleep at night, so your phone is near where you sleep. Can we look at some settings to make sure your phone doesn't send notifications that wake you up?"

"What makes your phone so easy to use at night? What makes it hard to put down?"

Overheard conversation about social media

"When I was driving you and your friends today, I heard you talk about something you saw on social media last week. I'm interested in what's going on for you, so I'd like to hear a little more from you about what happened."

Possible Follow-Up Prompts

"How did you feel about that?"

"What are ways that this happening on social media helped or hurt this situation compared to if it happened offline?"

"Who can you talk to when things like that happen?"

"Are there ways I could have supported you better during that situation?"

Prompts to encourage reflection around relationships with media

"Do you feel like people are being real on social media? How can you tell if they are being authentic?"

"When you left your phone at home by accident the other day, how did that feel? Why?"

"How do you wish [your phone/favorite social media platform] was designed better? What would you change?"

"What does it feel like when you've lost track of time in your phone, versus [other favorite activities like a book, doing art work, playing basketball]?"

"What do you think [platform] knows about you? How do you feel about that?"

"Have you ever given attention to how you feel immediately after using your favorite social media app for a while? If you aren't sure, try to check in next time right after — do you feel good or bad? Why do you think so?"

Reflecting on other peoples' tech use

"I know that you've seen classmates spend time on their phones, what do you think is good about it? What is annoying? Why?"

"When you're hanging out with friends, and they are all on their phones and not paying attention to each other, how does that feel?"

"When you're on [platform], how do you know who is nice and who's not? How do you decide who to block, or who is a grown up or a teen?"

"Have you noticed any of your friends change as a result of spending a lot of time on their phones? How do they change?"

"What's the cringiest thing you have seen other kids do online? How did you feel about it?"

"What's the most hilarious thing you've seen other kids do online?"

"When you're trying to talk to someone, and they're looking at their phone, how does that feel?"

Parents talking about their own media use

"I'm feeling overwhelmed with all the technology in our day. Can we think about ways to put it down and spend quality time together?"

"I sometimes have a hard time not checking my phone or feeling the need to respond to texts or emails. I'm working on how to be better about my own boundaries. Let's help each other find a good balance."

"What do you think of my phone use habits? What could I do better?"

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