autism at-a-glance

Internet Safety for Teens with ASD

W e live in a digital world where communication via the internet is the norm. Friends are made and maintained virtually on sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Social media may be an accessible venue for adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to build and maintain social relationships, as well as learn new things and explore their interests. While there are many benefits to using the internet, there are also risks and with easy access to the internet, teens with ASD must learn about these risks and how to protect themselves.

What are the risks?

Fixation on Games or Social Networking Sites

Teens with ASD are vulnerable to becoming compulsive internet users. They may struggle to shift from a fantasy gaming world to day to day activities. Compulsive internet use also limits in-person interactions which reduces opportunities to practice and learn social communication skills. Here are ideas related to limiting obsessive technology use:

- Set clear limits on internet use and use a timer for the teen to indicate when use is finished. Software timers can also be used to limit access to certain websites to specific hours
- Encourage technology or computer use in the same room as an adult

Risks to Internet Safety

Exposure to Inappropriate Material

With a simple click, anyone, any age can access images of violence, pornography, and death. These images be difficult to explain to individuals on the spectrum, and may contribute to "copy-cat" behavior from the adolescent with ASD, especially if they do not know these images are inappropriate. Legal issues can ensue if adolescents access or download inappropriate content. Here are ideas to help adolescents with ASD surf safely on the internet:

- Have a discussion about the dangers and consequences of visiting inappropriate websites
- Teach the teen about images or content that could be considered criminal and encourage the teen to tell an adult if encouraged to access this content by other
- Install a pop-up blocker or other software program to block content and monitor content accessed (knowing that these methods are not foolproof)

Predators

Predators can prey on young people and individuals who they think might be easily manipulated. A predator may be after personal information to steal someone's identity or they may want to convince someone to do something for them that is not legal. This can pose a significant risk to individuals with autism and put them in danger. Here are some ideas to prepare adolescents with ASD

- Give the teen a checklist of information he/ she should not be giving out online for safety reasons (for example: birthdate, social security number, address, school name)

- Encourage the teen to check with an adult if he/ she is unsure If someone is trying to get their personal information

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the harassment of others using the internet. Individuals with autism are often easy targets because they can miss social cues and not realize they are being bullied or if they do, they may lack the skills to stand up for themselves or to communicate with others about what is going on. This can lead to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Here are some ideas to prepare an adolescent with ASD to recognize and handle cyberbullying:

- Discuss what bullying looks like so the teen knows how to identify it (for example: name calling and threatening images)
- Teach the teen how to block "friends" on social networking sites like Facebook so they know how to get rid of a bully
- Encourage the teen to seek out a responsible adult to help them handle the situation

Teens with ASD can also engage in cyberbullying without understanding the consequences of their actions. Perhaps they have been the victim of cyberbullying and want to turn the tables. It is important to discuss cyberbullying with the teen and help him/her to understand how its seriousness.

Teaching Internet Safety

Having simple and frequent conversations about internet safety can help adolescents with ASD understand the benefits and risks of using the internet. If needed, enlist the help of a professional such as the school media specialist or counselor for guidance or to assist in having the conversation. In addition, establishing clear rules and limits to internet use can beneficial in supporting internet safety.

Suggestions for Parents and School Staff

1 ### Visual Supports
Provide pictures or reminders of internet safety tips. A checklist of internet dos and don'ts can be effective. Also, consider lists of acceptable websites or reminders to check in with parents or teachers.

2 ### Role Playing
Role play multiple scenarios with the teen about internet safety. Have a conversation with him/her afterwards about why scenarios are safe or unsafe.

3 ### Social Narratives, Scripts or Social Stories
Write a description of an internet safety scenario in story form and read it to/with the teen. These can help to reinforce ideas about how to stay safe while using the internet.

PLAY IT SAFE

To teach teens with ASD about internet safety, an acronym called PLAY IT SAFE can be helpful (adapted from Cerebra.org).

P - Personal information-don't share it, never give out your full name, where you live, or where you go to school.

L - Let a trusted adult know-tell someone if anyone asks for your personal information

A - Attachments-beware before opening any attachments.

Y - Your feelings are important-if something happens that makes you uncomfortable, tell an adult right away

I - Information-remember that not everything you see online is true. If you are unsure ask a trusted adult

T - Take breaks from the computer-it is important to take breaks so that you don't strain your eyes and so you also have a chance to talk to other people and do other things. Set a timer to ensure you are not on the internet too long.

S - Spending money online-don't buy things without permission. Money should only be spent by a trusted adult.

A - Act politely-don't say anything online that you would not say to someone in person

F - Friends online should stay online-if someone asks to meet you, tell them no and always let an adult know

E - Enjoy yourself-Play safe and have fun!!!

Resources

Autism Speaks Internet Safety, Social Networking, and Technology

https://www.autismspeaks.org/docs/family_services_docs/transition/Internet.pdf

Cerebra

http://parentsprotect.co.uk/files/learning_disabilities_autism_internet_safety_parent_guide.pdf

Internet safety role playing discussions

www.safesurfingkids.com/lesson_plans_grades_3_12.htm

Indiana Resource Center for Autism

www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/Bullying-and-students-on-the-autism-spectrum

Social Safety: An Online Social Networking Guide and Parents and Teachers of Young Adults with Cognitive Disabilities

https://socialsafety.wordpress.com/stranger-danger/educationalopportunities/

Lonie, N. (2015). Online Safety for Children and Teens on the Autism Spectrum: A parent and caregiver's guide. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.