



Center on Technology and Disability  
[www.CTDinstitute.org](http://www.CTDinstitute.org)

# Teaching Students with Disabilities about Online Safety

Re-published with permission from  
American Institutes for Research



AMERICAN  
INSTITUTES  
FOR RESEARCH®



# Teaching Students with Disabilities about Online Safety

By: Alise Brann, Kristin Ruedel, and PowerUp WHAT WORKS  
(2014)

## Overview

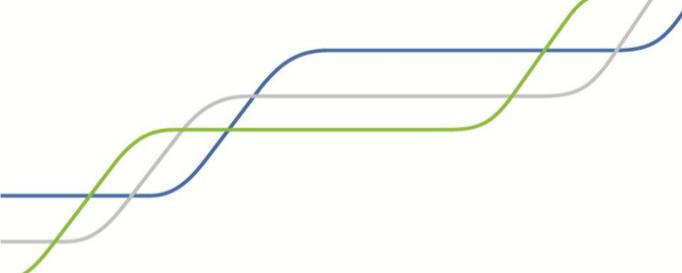
**As students spend more time online, lessons in online safety and appropriate behavior are critical. Students with disabilities may be at particular risk online.**

Many parents and teachers of children with disabilities are well aware of the potential for in-class bullying and make efforts to stop bullying before it starts; but what about the exclusion and harassment that teachers and parents don't see? As young people spend an increasing amount of time online, much of the inappropriate behavior, language, and material they encounter is beyond the immediate view of parents, teachers, and guardians. Therefore, preparing all students for safe interactions online is important, and it is all the more critical to examine the special risks and issues that students with disabilities face online. Learn from these tips and strategies to help your students meet the [standards for Digital Citizenship](#) and to guide your students to use technology and digital media in a safe and responsible way.

## Using in Your Classroom

Many kids with learning disabilities (LD), ADHD, autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and/or emotional/behavioral disorders struggle with social interactions and appropriate behavior.

They may have difficulty reading social cues, regulating their behavior, determining the accuracy of information, or judging if someone is trustworthy. Because of these social challenges, they may be at a higher risk for bullying, harassment, and victimization when interacting with peers and adults online.

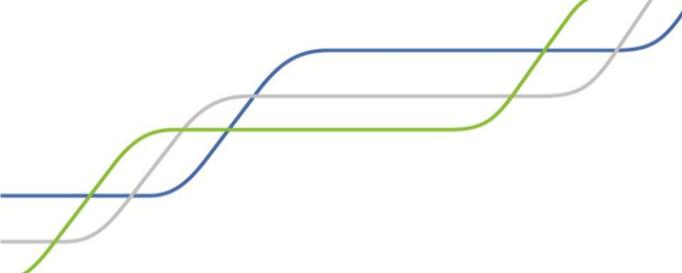


Any child may inadvertently develop a relationship online with someone who seems friendly—someone who takes an interest in his or her life and asks superficially harmless questions about his or her home, school, or friends. However, a tween or teen with learning or other cognitive disabilities may not recognize that this seemingly friendly adult is asking inappropriate questions or that certain types of information may be dangerous to share with a stranger (e.g., phone number, school, real name).

This is not to say that children with disabilities should not go online or that there is nothing of value online for children. In fact, research has suggested that the opposite is true. However, the challenges that children with LD face on the Internet mean that it is important to be aware of children's online activities and to talk with them openly and directly about what they may encounter. These conversations are essential with any child, but particularly for students with disabilities.

### **Tips for Teaching Online Safety**

- Discuss unsafe information to share online — teach all students about information that is unsafe to share online, including their real name, school, phone number, address, and picture or other identifying information. Make a "Do Not Share" list and post it in your classroom as a reminder.
  - Help your students understand that what they post online is not private, even if they think that only their friends can see it.
  - Incorporate discussions of meaning in writing into your conversations about online behavior.
  - Statements meant to be funny or sarcastic can easily be misinterpreted online. This is a great opportunity to talk about formal versus informal language, and how writing for different audiences and purposes can change what you say (i.e., the use of emoticons or the "sarcasm tag" /sarcasm).
  - Teach responsible online citizenship and help your students recognize and avoid malicious online behavior. Model appropriate and inappropriate interactions, and teach students ways to escape and report cyber-bullying. Many great resources are available that help students model different situations online.
- 



## What the Research Says

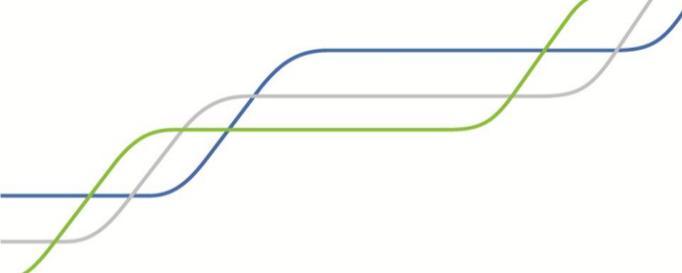
Although some research has shown that young people with disabilities are at greater risk of being victims of bullying and harassment, there is little research about how these risks extend to online behavior. However, it is safe to assume that many of the same issues exist online as they do offline.

Social interactions are complex; the social skills needed for basic conversations are different than those needed for resolving conflicts and determining appropriate behavior in social situations. For example, basic social skills include the ability to maintain eye contact, understand facial expressions, and recognize appropriate personal space (Canney & Byrne, 2006; Waltz, 1999). Participating in more complex social situations, on the other hand, requires interaction skills (resolving conflicts, taking turns, interacting with authority figures), affective skills (identifying feelings, understanding the feelings of others, recognizing whether someone is to be trusted), and cognitive social skills (making choices, self-monitoring, understanding community norms).

These skills, which are certainly important in face-to-face communication, are essential to healthy and safe online interactions as well. This places children who have difficulties with complex social skills at a potentially higher risk for dangers online. For example, a student who faces challenges with making appropriate choices or recognizing strangers' trustworthiness may more easily become an online victim of a sexual predator, an e-mail phishing scheme, or cyber-bullying. Because children with disabilities may be more prone to loneliness (Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002), they may be especially vulnerable to the harmful advances of online users who show a seemingly benign interest in their lives.

The MacArthur Foundation's recent study of teens' online behavior indicates that online activity helps teens learn important social and technical skills; develop and extend friendships; and explore new and familiar educational topics (Ito et al., 2008). The same anonymity that may present challenges for children who struggle with social skills can also give them the opportunity to practice interactions with others in a "safe" environment, the freedom to explore different aspects of their





identities, and the confidence to request help with less fear of rejection (Raskind, Margalit, & Higgins, 2006).

A recent study on teens' use of social networking sites found that more than half of the adolescents whose social networking pages researchers reviewed posted private content and information about risky behavior, including sexual activity, drug use, and violence (Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center of Seattle, 2009).

Encouragingly, when a physician in the study sent teens messages through MySpace warning them about the private content they were posting online, many teens either removed the information or set their profile to private (allowing only friends to see the information). As this example demonstrates, in many cases an explicit conversation with a trusted authority figure, such as a parent, a teacher, a family friend, or the child's doctor, is enough to help kids think more carefully about the personal information they make available online.

Although threats to children's safety may make it tempting to ban Internet use entirely, experts agree that educating children about the risks and responsibilities of online communities is the best way to keep them safe. Completely blocking access or using scare tactics are methods that simply do not work (Ash, 2009). Instead, stay involved with children's lives and help them develop the skills they need to safely reap the benefits of the online world.

## [References](#)

*Alise Brann, Kristin Ruedel, and PowerUp WHAT WORKS (2011)*

