

WHY DON'T TEENS REPORT DIGITAL HARMS TO ADULTS?

(AND WHAT CAN WE DO TO MAKE THEM MORE LIKELY TO)

A GUIDE FOR ADULTS, INFORMED BY TEENS

NOVEMBER 2025

As teens' social lives now regularly involve digital communication and spending time online, they face greater risks of experiencing digital harms.

Digital harms can affect young people's safety, health, and rights. These harms are often called "cyberbullying," however researchers use terms such as "technology-facilitated violence and bullying" to capture the range of harms that can occur using technology. Some common examples of these harms include: posting sexualized rumours about someone, posting photos or videos of someone to mock their appearance or behaviour, non-consensually sharing or threatening to share intimate images, sending harassing messages, or publicly posting private information about someone's mental health.

Our DIY Digital Safety research team talked to Canadian teens to understand why they are reluctant to seek help when they experience digital harms and what adults can do to make them more likely to come to us for support. Based on 25 focus groups with 146 teens from across Canada (including in both rural and urban areas of Alberta, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec, and the Yukon), this guide aims to help adults understand why teens may fear reaching out to us for support and what we can do to change that.

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WHY TEENS SAY THEY AVOID TELLING ADULTS

Teens told us that they often hesitate to reach out to adults for help because they **fear being judged, shamed, or blamed**. This is especially true for teens who experience technology-facilitated sexual violence.

In fact, many teens described how **fears of getting in trouble for consensually sharing a nude image of themselves** made them avoid seeking help if those images were shared without their consent.



Teens also **fear that seeking help might lead to their technology being taken away or restricted in overly broad ways**.



Teens said that adults sometimes ignore the messy relational dynamics and social issues that they are trying to get help with, and instead just see the technology as the problem and take away all access to their devices. This can be especially distressing to teens if they are going through a challenging time and are using technology to stay connected to supportive friends or resources.

For example, **Sarah** explained why she didn't ask adults for support when her intimate image was shared by a boy without her consent:
"I feel like some adults can be judgmental and get mad at you for actually [consensually] sending the picture. [...] I'm always scared of [getting in trouble for that], so I just don't tell anyone".

For example, **Mia** shared how, after telling her mom about getting unwanted sexual messages on Discord, her mom took away her phone rather than helping her deal with the impact of getting the messages or set up better privacy settings. Mia said that, as a result, she is now less likely to seek help from her mom in the future:
"Now I'm afraid to tell her things, because I'm afraid she'll just do that [take it away]".

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WHY TEENS SAY THEY AVOID TELLING ADULTS

Teens also **worry about strong emotional reactions from adults**, especially parents. Teens felt that adults see all digital harms as really scary.

Adults' strong emotional reactions likely stem from hearing about worst-case scenarios in the media. Because of this, teens felt that seeking help from an adult might increase their distress rather than reassuring them or helping to deescalate the situation.

As **Theo** said: **"The adult reaction can be stressful, if they take it too far and you're still a child, you'll think it's way too big of a deal. [...] you're already scared, and then there's an adult freaking out and it's scaring them".**



Teens also **worry that adults will escalate the response without their consent**.



This may be by involving authorities like the police or by telling other adults that they weren't ready to disclose to.

Betty provided an example of how disempowering this felt when she disclosed her experience to a guidance counsellor who immediately escalated the response without asking her what felt helpful: **"[...when you confide in an adult] all of a sudden your guidance counsellor is calling your parents, and all of a sudden your parents are calling the Mounties, and all of a sudden the Mounties are calling the Navy SEALs. All of a sudden, you've got the entire cavalry coming".**

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WHAT ADULTS CAN DO TO MAKE TEENS MORE LIKELY TO SEEK THEIR HELP

Teens want **digital safety education** that avoids **scare tactics** and instead offers balanced, reassuring discussions about the challenges of digital spaces.

Rather than hearing about worst case scenarios as if they are inevitable, teens said they would prefer learning about practical tools and strategies to prevent or respond to harms.

For example, **Valentina** explained that adults are always telling them that kids who experience sexual extortion "**kill themselves because they don't know how to handle it**", without then reassuring teens that there are emotional and technical supports they can access if they are experiencing something like this and that this won't ruin their whole lives.



Teens want adults to **take their concerns seriously and listen with openness to how they see the issue**. Teens said they want adults to listen to how they understand the context and impact of a situation, rather than reacting based on their own assumptions about what is serious or what kind of response is needed.



As Theo said, "**[Adults] either give you too little of a reaction and they might get angry at you for over doing it or, [...] on the other side, they'll get angry at you for taking it as such a little thing**".

A teenager may think it is no big deal to block a stranger who is sending them sexual messages, but they might be deeply impacted by a close friend posting a secret they shared in confidence. This is why it is essential to listen to young people's perspectives on where the harm is located for them and what support they need.

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WHAT ADULTS CAN DO TO MAKE TEENS MORE LIKELY TO SEEK THEIR HELP

Teens want spaces to openly discuss the “weird stuff” they might encounter in digital spaces. Teens felt the “cyberbullying” education they get from adults is often too vague and doesn’t help them to process and get new perspectives on the wide range of digital harms they experience.



Teens want access to non-judgmental adults with whom they can talk openly about their digital worlds and difficult situations.



Teens said they wanted non-judgmental spaces to tell adults about all of the **“weird stuff”** and **“taboo stuff”** they see online and to get help unpacking the social issues (like violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia) and relational dynamics (like navigating conflict, disagreement, and heartbreak) that often underlie digital harms.

For example, **Mariam** felt comfortable seeking help from her mom because she reassured her that **“whatever you do, I’m going to accept it. Like you did it, but people make mistakes.”** Unfortunately, many teens did not feel as confident as Mariam that they had a non-judgmental adult to confide in.

Teens also want more options to access confidential and anonymous supports. Even teens with access to a supportive adult felt there were some situations where it was just too hard to tell an adult in their lives. For this reason, teens want more information about anonymous/confidential supports. Teens said that this was especially needed for cases of technology-facilitated sexual violence.



For example, **Lu** explained why he didn’t tell anyone when he was being sexually extorted: **“I feel like for me, [even though I don’t think my parents would be mad], I was still scared of how my parents would view me as weak or gullible or just like, just it’s embarrassing and it’s very vulnerable. [...] I just, I was so embarrassed, and I couldn’t tell anyone.”**

This illustrates how essential it is to inform teens about the confidential and anonymous supports that exist including helplines like **Kids Help Phone** and, for sexual extortion and other image-based harms, **Need Help Now**.



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