Safe Surfing- Practices to Promote Positive Online Youth Engagement

Staff Reports: Anna Clough, Tribal Youth Resource Center
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The public health crisis has impacted youth in many ways. With more time at home, youth may be utilizing electronic devices to communicate with family, friends, teachers and others. Prevention program staff may communicate messages to youth and families through phone, social media platforms, and online communities. Maintaining safety in virtual platforms is key for all youth.

Youth Safety Online

Social distancing is impacting youth across the country. Youth have been impacted by closures of school, cancellation of athletics and extra-curricular activities and participation in community-based programs. Many youths may find themselves accessing online platforms, social media, online games and other technology to maintain engagement with their peers or to participate in distance learning. Connecting through social media may also be helpful for some youth in response to feelings of isolation during social distancing, however extended time on social media should be approached with caution. While using social media to stay connected is good, experts note that for youth "unfettered access to screens or social media is not smart, and may amplify anxiety." [1]

As always, it is important to set up reasonable time-frames and access to technology. Prevention program staff can support youth and caregivers by sharing positive and safe ways to connect with friends and others during times of social distancing. The Center for Cyber Safety and Education notes several ways that caregivers and youth can maintain online safety while using social media, including actions such as:

- Respecting and follow age requirement rules- they are in place for a reason
- Making parental [caregiver] approval of social groups or networks part of house rules.
- Talking about what is an acceptable or respectable post.
- "Friending" or "Following" your kids so you can check in on their social media activity. Parents/Caregivers don't have to participate just take a look as often as possible.
- Remembering that even though a child's profile may be set to private, that will not prevent them from seeing what others post and share.
- Checking for safety, blocking and reporting resources on each site being used.

- Teaching and reminding youth to think before they post comments or pictures and to **never share personal information like age, school, address, full name, or when parents [caregivers] are not home.**

Technology and Prevention Program Outreach

These times are unprecedented and many youths may be in stressful home environments. ChildTrends notes that "associated social and economic stressors can undermine children's development and well-being and that rates of poverty, unemployment, parental mental health problems, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, and intimate partner violence tend to rise during disasters." [2]. Program staff may utilize virtual and telephonic connections to outreach youth and families and connect them with critical local resources. While program staff may not be able to be physically present with youth- they can offer strategies, supplies, and provide resources to support meaningful age-appropriate ways to talk to children and youth during the pandemic. [3] Engaging youth in virtual platforms should be done in a manner that is safe, age-appropriate, and with necessary permissions. Staff should adhere to any written or suggested protocols developed by the organization in which they serve. There are ways to continue positive youth engagement even during the time of crisis. Many online platforms offer ways to share information, resources, and connect youth with their peers and community members.

Program Staff- Demonstrating Positive Digital Life Skills

In "Deepening the Ways We Engage Youth as (Digital) Citizens," Educator Innovator highlights that teaching online safety is more than avoidance of negative behaviors. The article shares about a recent tweet of the International Society of Technology and Education - "citizenship in digital environments shouldn't be a list of don'ts, it needs to be a list of do's" The skills needed to thrive in an online world go far beyond online safety." [4] Check out the List of 5 Competencies to Support "Doing"

- **Inclusive**- I am open to hearing and respectfully recognizing multiple viewpoints and I engage with others online with respect and empathy.
- **Informed-** I evaluate the accuracy, perspective, and validity of digital media and social posts.
- **Engaged-** I use technology and digital channels for civic engagement, to solve problems and be a force for good in both physical and virtual communities.
- **Balanced-** I make informed decisions about how to prioritize my time and activities online and off.
- **Alert-** I am aware of my online actions, and know how to be safe and create safe spaces for others online.

By engaging youth in positive ways and demonstrating the 5 do's program staff can illuminate youth to the safe and positive aspects of digital activity. Further, program staff may continue to utilize increased social and digital media to engage youth beyond the scope of pandemic and social

distancing. Supporting youth awareness, safety, and online literacy are skills that will be helpful beyond this current season of social-distance.

Teen-Specific Resources

- Net Literacy notes that youth are part of a digital generation and that internet safety training should:
  - Reflect that the Internet is a positive and empowering place
  - That safety training should become part of an organization's culture rather than a periodic event.
  - The voice of youth is an essential component of safety programs.

- Check Out Teens Engaging Teens About Internet Safety Which includes links to Safe Connects an online safety program that established a "student-teaching-students-and-parents" model for school systems throughout America.

- WeRNative offers advice to teens and youth, Safe Online Chat notes how youth can maintain safety and awareness when accessing online chat forums.

  https://www.wernative.org/articles/safe-online-chat

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[1] How Teenagers Can Protect Their Mental Health During Coronavirus Covid-19,
https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teenagers-can-protect-their-mental-health-during-coronavirus-covid-19
[2] Ways to Promote children's Resilience to the COVID-19 Pandemic, https://www.childtrends.org/publications/ways-to-promote-childrens-resilience-to-the-covid-19-pandemic
[3] Ibid.
[4] Deepening the Ways We Engage Youth as (Digital) Citizens https://educatorinnovator.org/deepening-the-ways-we-engage-youth-as-digital-citizens/