

Introduction to Youth Online Peer Support: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers¹

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The intended audience of this publication consists of parents and caregivers of teenagers. The purpose of the publication is to inform the reader about online friendships between teens, mental health and suicidality in teens, ideas for supporting a teen whose online friend discloses thoughts of self-harm and suicide, and the importance of safety and self-care.

Introduction

Living in a digital age brings many exciting innovations and challenges. Computers and smartphones have changed the way we communicate, receive news, and interact with others. Teens especially appear to be well-versed in technology; many know the most popular apps, videos, trends, and games. It may seem as though youth are never without their electronic devices, and studies have found this to be true. In 2019, the Pew Research Center found that 95% of surveyed teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% of surveyed teens reported being online “nearly constantly” (Schaeffer, 2019). On average, younger teens and preteens (aged 11 through 14) report spending nine hours per day in front of a screen for entertainment. The number of hours decreases to just over seven hours for teens aged 15 through 18 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Online resources and apps to share information and discuss mental health struggles with peers are popular among teens

dealing with mental health issues. According to a study (Rideout & Fox, 2018), over half of teens and young adults reporting moderate to severe symptoms of depression used online resources to connect to peers with similar mental health concerns.

Online Friends

Having a presence in online communities and social media is a way for teens to meet like-minded peers all over the country and/or the world. The phenomenon of teens messaging and making friends online happens frequently; in fact, recent data reports that 57% of youth aged 13 to 17 have made a friend online (Massing-Schaffer et al., 2022). Online friendships can increase a teen’s well-being and social circle, and can strengthen friendships and connections with offline peers (Mittmann et al., 2022). Close relationships and trust can form with online friends over time, and teens may feel comfortable talking with them about the struggles they are experiencing.

Youth Mental Health, the Internet, and Social Media

Many teens face mental health challenges including depression, thoughts of self-harm, and suicidal ideation. When facing these challenges, teens are more likely to seek help

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from their peers than adults (Dyson et al., 2016), so they might talk about the issues with their online friends. Close, dependable online friendships can encourage sharing of difficult feelings and circumstances. This sharing can alleviate loneliness and indicators of depression. Online friendships and Internet use can be protective factors for teens and may encourage healthy alternatives and support for mental health concerns, thoughts of self-harm, or thoughts of suicide (Massing-Schaffer et al., 2022).

With online friendships becoming more common, your teen may have an online friend who discloses that they are struggling with their mental health or thinking about self-harm or suicide. Your teen may ask for help from you while they attempt to support their online friend. As a caring adult, you may have questions about whether a teen supporting another teen who has mental health challenges is appropriate or safe, particularly if it is primarily through social media or over the Internet. While there is no absolute yes or no answer to this question, there are several things that you can do to help keep your teen safe and supported if they choose to help their online friend.

My teen is supporting someone online. What should I do?

Hearing that your teen is supporting someone through some big feelings or even a crisis can raise many questions and concerns. Feeling unsure, scared, or wary that your teen is providing this support is normal. Below are a few ways to connect with your teen about being a support for a friend who is struggling.

- **Check in.** Talk with your teen about what it means to them to be supporting their online friend. Do they feel good about themselves for helping a friend in need, or do they feel responsible for their friend's well-being? Feeling responsible for a friend is only natural; however, it is important that you let your teen know that it is not their responsibility to "fix" their friend. It provides an opportunity for you to discuss healthy boundaries in relationships and ways your teen can help their friend, while recognizing that they are not responsible for their friend's choices. Checking in can also help determine if your teen is struggling while supporting their online friend. Asking if they are feeling stress or anxiety when speaking with their friend about the friend's problems can help determine if others need to be involved in supporting the online friend. Talking about any changes you are seeing in your teen's behavior, health, and stress level can help to start conversations about whether supporting an

online friend is causing your teen distress. If this is the case, it may be time to get others involved.

- **Ask questions.** Show interest in your child's relationship with the friend and ask how things are going. Has the online friend told your teen about any changes that they are experiencing? Does anyone else in the friend's life know how they are feeling? How is your teen doing in the moment? Asking questions and actively listening to your teen's responses can strengthen connections with them and encourage the sharing of emotions, successes, and struggles they experience while supporting their friend (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).
- **Encourage self-care and fun.** Participating in self-care and fun activities promotes mental wellness and can be a chance for your teen to take a break. Encourage recharging activities such as getting together with other friends, exercising, or being with family members and pets. Emphasize the importance of eating nutritious food, drinking water, and getting a good night's rest. Taking care of themselves can help them support others.
- **Take care of yourself.** Your own well-being is also important! Supporting your teen through a difficult time can also affect your overall health. Be aware of the signs of burnout: fatigue, intense emotional reactions, physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches, and difficulty concentrating. Practice good self-care by engaging in enjoyable activities, eating healthy foods, drinking water, and getting good rest each night. Feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to best support your teen's situation with their online friend may be a sign to reach out for help for yourself. Connect with supportive friends, family, or a therapist to process any difficult emotions that might be surfacing.

Other Important Questions

- **Will my teen become suicidal by helping someone who is suicidal?**

Many young people will experience stressful situations during their teen years, either directly or through a friend. Feeling depressed, helpless, sad, or other difficult emotions due to stressful life events is normal and does not typically result in thoughts of suicide or suicidal behaviors (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention & The Dougy Center, n.d.). Numerous studies have shown that talking or asking someone about suicide will not put the idea in their head; it actually may encourage them to talk about how they are feeling (National Suicide Prevention Line, n.d.). Check in with your teen if you believe they might be struggling with their online friend's situation and reach out to a mental health professional for additional support.

- **Do other people need to be involved?**

When asking questions, you may become concerned about something that your teen tells you and feel that others need to be involved. Everyone's safety is the number one priority. Getting help for your teen's online friend may be difficult, especially if their location is unknown. However, some things can be done. Many social media apps and gaming sites have a "Report" function that offers online friend help. If you know where the friend is located, reaching out to a local crisis center or their local emergency services may be the first step in getting them support. Talk with your teen first about your thoughts on getting others involved in their online friend's situation. Reach out to resources together to express concern about their online friend. Your teen may have concerns that their online friend will feel betrayed or angry if others get involved. Keeping someone alive and safe and getting them connected to the help they need are a priority. Encourage your teen to share with their online friend why they feel others need to be involved, while communicating care and concern for their well-being (Martinelli, 2023; Schimelpfening, 2022). Offer to talk with your teen about their feelings about the situation or encourage them to reach out to other trusted friends, adults, or supportive hotlines. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 right away.

- **Can't I just tell my teen to stop talking with their online friend?**

Teens who are struggling with their mental health are more likely to confide in friends first before speaking with adults or professionals (Dyson et al., 2016). Your teen may be the first person whom their online friend tells. Showing empathy, kindness, and compassion to their friend is vital. However, expressing concern and encouraging trusted adult or professional support to their online friend can encourage them to take the first step to getting help. Discuss healthy boundaries with your teen around how much they can or should be involved in supporting their online friend and what to do if they begin to feel uneasy or overwhelmed (Martinelli, 2023; The Jed Foundation, n.d.).

- **What if it is my teen who is reaching out for help to other teens online?**

Asserting independence and attempting to solve problems on one's own are a normal part of development in the teen years. A teen's peers are often their primary support network. Peers may be more aware of what is happening in a young person's life than their parents or other family members. Staying connected with your teen by checking in, sharing details of your life, offering support, and modeling

respectful conversations can keep the lines of communication more open (Child Mind Institute, 2023).

Online friendships can be as valuable as in-person friendships and can provide caring and empathetic support to a young person who may be struggling. As a parent, it is important to communicate with your teen about the value of friendships and the courage it takes to help those in need. At the same time, it is important to check in to evaluate your teen's sense of well-being, as well as their safety and the safety of their online friend, and to examine whether your teen is maintaining healthy relationship boundaries. Sharing your thoughts and feelings can provide a helpful environment to give and receive support.

Resources and Support

Listed below are resources for both adults and teens to receive support regarding mental health and thoughts of self-harm or suicide. These resources have staff or volunteers trained in mental health crisis intervention.

National Suicide Prevention Line

Call or text 988.

<https://988lifeline.org>

A 24/7 phone, text, and webchat line for people having thoughts of suicide. Talking with a crisis center through the NSPL is free and confidential.

Crisis Text Line

Text "Home" to 741741.

<https://www.crisistextline.org>

A 24/7 free texting service for people in crisis. Volunteers provide support through text messages or WhatsApp.

YouthLine (A Crisis and Support Line for Teens)

Call 1-877-968-8491 or text "Teen2Teen" to 839863.

<https://theyouthline.org>

A free, confidential teen-to-teen crisis and support line. Teens are available every day from 7:00 PM to 1:00 AM Eastern Time to answer phone calls, texts, and webchats from teens who need support. Adults are available to provide support by phone at all other hours.

Florida Warm Line

Call 1-800-945-1355.

<https://peersupportfl.org/peer-experience-line/>

A phone line for people living in Florida to talk about what they are feeling and experiencing. The line is answered every day from 4:00 PM to 10:00 PM Eastern Time. This line is not for people experiencing a crisis but for those who would like to speak with an empathetic listener with lived experience with mental health.

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