



## Teens and Technology: Safety, Privacy, & Empowerment

Technology abuse is increasingly becoming a pattern within dating abuse, which affects a large number of teens and young adults. As with any tactic of abuse, there are ways that tech abuse may look the same for any age group and there are ways that it can differ significantly. As more light is shed on this issue, we are able to better understand the impact tech abuse has on this population. For any parent, guardian, or professional working with a teen or young adult, it's important to understand how technology can impact their privacy and safety, as well as how it can be empowering and helpful. It is also incredibly important to understand technology access and use to better support young people living in the margins who may struggle to access the technology needed to thrive in our digital world or experience specific, targeted form of harassment and abuse.

### **Positive Use of Tech**

Technology is a powerful tool that can be used by teens in positive ways. It offers a level of flexibility online to explore and create authentic versions of themselves. It allows connections to find allies, receive support services, and obtain an education. In a survey by the Pew Research Center, "40% of respondents said social media had a positive impact because it helps them keep in touch and interact with others."<sup>1</sup> Some online communities provide teens a comfortable space to connect with others sharing the same identity or interests without fear of anyone judging them. Having these connections can boost self-esteem through validation, feedback, and acceptance. These online spaces can also decrease isolation, fear, and stigma and increase a teen's self-worth.

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<sup>1</sup> Monica Anderson & Jingjing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018," Pew Research Center, May 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>

Through social media, teens express themselves, play games, create challenges, raise awareness, and organize around the issues and injustices that affect them and their future. “The Internet also can be helpful to young people who are looking for information about health and sexuality, yet don’t feel like they can ask about these issues at home or in their schools.”<sup>2</sup> Technology provides the ability to research questions about sex, STDs, and give reassurance to youth. They can also create petitions, do research, and educate themselves and others on topics that impact them. During times of crisis, technology has been one of the most important tools to keep youth connected to their peers and school community. Because of this, suggesting that teens disconnect from technology if they are experiencing tech abuse can just further isolate and remove them from their greater community.

### **Impact of Technology Misuse**

Misusing technology to perpetrate harassment, stalking, or reputation damage are common tactics of abuse within the context of dating relationships. In a 2013 study, “nearly half of all young people ages 14-24 reported being electronically harassed in some form and 40% of teens reported incidences of digital dating abuse.”<sup>3</sup> Tactics of abuse such as harassment, stalking, impersonation, and the distribution of intimate images without consent are the same across age groups and are rooted in patterns of power and control. In the context of abuse broadly, whether teen dating abuse, intimate partner violence, or elder abuse, technology can be misused to stalk, send harassing messages, harm reputations, isolate, or coerce another person into sexual acts or for intimate images. Tech abuse also overlaps with other forms of abuse, such as financial or sexual harassment. An Urban Institute study found that cyber dating abuse had the greatest degree of overlap with psychological dating abuse, with nearly all cyber dating abuse victims

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<sup>2</sup> Amina Sharma, “Benefits of Teens Using Technology”, Center for Innovative Public Health Research, date accessed: March 1, 2021, <https://innovativepublichealth.org/blog/benefits-of-technology>

<sup>3</sup> Trevor Thompson, Jennifer Benz, and Jennifer Agiesta, “The Digital Abuse Study: Experiences of Teens and Young Adults”, AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, October 2013, <https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/AP-NORC-Center-and-MTV-Digital-Abuse-Study-FINAL.pdf>

also reporting psychological dating abuse, while only half reported physical dating lead to depression, anxiety, failing classes, drug use, and suicidal thoughts. Survivors may also avoid going online because they may fear further abuse from the abuser or bullying from their peers. It's important to support teens as they navigate these challenges, helping to find ways to address abuse while also increasing safety and privacy online so they can feel empowered.

### **Supporting Youth: "You've Got This!"**

Service providers, caregivers, and others may feel uneasy when engaging with teens impacted by tech misuse if they are unfamiliar with the tech. However, regardless of the tech involved, much of the advocacy and support will be the same. It's normal to feel you may need more information or a specific approach if you're not regularly participating in the culture or norms of a certain population. By focusing on building connections, establishing trust, and remaining survivor-centered, we can empower teens to make informed decisions around tech use.

### **Here are Some Tips to Get you Started:**

1. Listen. You don't need to know the details of every type of tech teens are using to recognize patterns of abuse, stalking, and harassment.
2. Ask basic questions to help identify the risk of the technology.

What is popular one day may be outdated the next. Technology use among teens can also vary between geographic locations and demographics. Downloading an app or researching a platform that teens are telling you about can help you understand the options for safety, security, and privacy. Many apps and online spaces have similar processes, community standards, and terms of service. You can also watch a video of how the app or online space functions or have the teens provide you with a tutorial. Engage them as experts.

3. When youth impacted by tech abuse are seeking support, ask:
  - What is happening?
  - Where/when is it happening? (a specific time, location, platform)
  - What does the person seem to know (what is the context)?
  - What does the teen want to see happen? Sometimes it's escalation of abuse, sometimes it's reputation management (help them explore options that could keep them safe)
  - How have they been keeping themselves safe?
  - Is there anyone else aware that this is happening?
  
4. Remember: Although technology can be misused as a tactic in teen dating abuse, technology can also be used strategically. Empowering teens to take control over their tech use will better help them understand how it can be used as a tool to support them, and they can create safe spaces free from abuse. Teens often have a lot more insight and skills to navigate technology, online spaces, and abusive people, than they are given credit for. Let them inform you on what they believe they need.

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