Talking with Teens About Technology Use

This document offers a framework to help parents/caregivers talk with their children about digital media overuse and addiction. Practitioners also can share this document with the families they serve. The approach emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and strategies appropriate for various stages of development. Specifically, content is organized by age group (ages 10–12, 13–15, and 16–18). Each section includes research-informed insights, sample scripts for what a parent might say, and reflective questions or activities. The tone is inclusive, compassionate, and nonjudgmental. Because every family is different, we encourage you to adapt these conversations to fit your own needs.

By practicing empathy, collaborative boundary-setting, and using reflective listening, parents/caregivers can help teens build healthier relationships with gaming, social media, online pornography, gambling, and other digital activities. This Guide also includes interactive worksheets to encourage open dialogue and self-reflection between parents/caregivers and teens. Remember, the goal is to create a supportive environment where adolescents feel heard and involved in finding solutions, rather than shamed or punished.

We recommend you read through each section of this document to become familiar with key approaches, review the example conversation starters, and adapt them to your own words and your teen's personality. Use the age-specific suggestions as a starting point—you know your child best, so adjust the wording as needed. After discussing, consider using the worksheets together with your teen to turn insights into concrete plans. The references listed at the end are the sources that informed this section of the Guide, if you'd like to explore them further.

Empathy and Understanding

Research Insight

Empathy and active listening are powerful tools in communication with teens. When parents listen without immediately judging or giving advice, teens feel heard and respected. This approach has been shown to reduce defensiveness in adolescents and increase their openness to conversation. Reflective listening—paraphrasing what your teen says to show you understand—helps them feel seen and valued. By actively listening and showing genuine interest, you create a safe space that builds trust and supports honest dialogue.

Example

Express empathy about a teen's interest (in this case, gaming) before diving into concerns:

Ages 10–12

Parent: "I know you're really into gaming, and it looks like you're having a lot of fun. Can you tell me more about what you enjoy most about it?"

This shows your child you value what matters to them and invites them to share, instead of opening with criticism.

Ages 13–15

Parent: "Gaming seems to be something you really enjoy and a way you connect with your friends. What's your favorite part, and do you sometimes find it hard to step away?"

Here you're acknowledging the social and fun aspects of gaming, while gently probing if they also feel the downside of it (like difficulty stopping). Balancing understanding with curiosity can lead to a more open conversation.

Ages 16–18

Parent: "I understand gaming is important to you—it's a great way to relax and connect with others. How do you feel it fits with your other goals and responsibilities?"

With older teens, showing that you recognize the value they get from gaming (or another activity) is important. This question also encourages them to think about how gaming impacts other parts of their lives, framing them as the one making decisions about balance.

In all these examples, the parent starts by validating the teen's interests or feelings before discussing limits or balance. This empathetic approach helps the teen feel respected. Research in adolescent psychology shows that when teens feel understood, they are less likely to shut down and more likely to engage in conversation. Empathy doesn't mean you agree with everything your teen says or does; it means you are trying to understand their perspective. This understanding forms a foundation of more challenging discussions about behavior changes.

Acknowledge Feelings and Concerns

Research Insight

Validating your teen's feelings—even when setting boundaries—helps them feel supported and less resistant to guidance. Studies show that when parents/caregivers acknowledge a teen's struggles or point of view, it leads to better outcomes in resolving conflicts and building mutual respect. In practice, this means letting your adolescent know that you take their feelings seriously. By openly discussing the emotional side of digital media use (stress, excitement, peer pressure, etc.), you normalize those feelings and show that you're on their team. This validation can defuse defensiveness and open the door to collaborative problem-solving.

Example

Acknowledge the mixed feelings a teen might have about social media and online activities:

Ages 10–12

Parent: "Spending time online is really fun, I get that. I wonder if there are times you find it hard to stop, too. What's it like for you when it's time to do something else?"

This approach both recognizes the enjoyment and gently addresses the potential difficulty of switching off. It invites the child to reflect on their own feelings when asked to log off, without blame. A younger adolescent might say it's "hard to stop because the game is exciting"—giving you insight into their experience.

Ages 13–15

Parent: "I know scrolling through TikTok or Instagram can be exciting, but it can also be overwhelming sometimes. Do you ever feel like it's hard to keep up with everything online? Let's talk about how to keep it positive and balanced."

Here the adult labels two common feelings: excitement and overwhelm. This normalizes the teen's possible sense of being overwhelmed by social media (like feeling pressure to respond or fear of missing out). It shows the teen that you're aware of both the pros and cons of social media. Studies indicate that teens are more receptive when they feel their emotions are understood rather than dismissed.

Ages 16–18

Parent: "Social media can play a big role in our lives, and I know it's a huge part of yours. Balancing it with school, work, and other activities can be challenging—I've even felt that myself. Have you ever felt like it's taking too much of your time? Maybe we can work together on making sure it stays balanced."

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In all these examples, the parent starts by validating the teen's interests or feelings before discussing limits or balance. This empathetic approach helps the teen feel respected. Research in adolescent psychology shows that when teens feel understood, they are less likely to shut down and more likely to engage in conversation. Empathy doesn't mean you agree with everything your teen says or does; it means you are trying to understand their perspective. This understanding forms a foundation for more challenging discussions about behavior changes.

Collaborative Problem Solving and Boundary Setting

Research Insight

Involving your teen in setting limits ("collaborative boundary setting") gives them a sense of ownership and autonomy, which is linked to higher follow-through on agreements. Adolescents are more likely to comply with rules or limits that they perceive as fair and that they had a hand in creating. On the other hand, they often resist rules that feel arbitrary or imposed without discussion. Developmental psychology research shows that teens have a heightened need for respect and autonomy as they grow—if they feel overcontrolled, they may shut down or rebel. By working together on solutions, you shift from a top-down approach to a partnership approach. This doesn't mean "anything goes"; it means teens help shape the boundaries, guided by your values and safety concerns.

Example

Discussing and setting screen time limits or schedules in a collaborative way:

Ages 10–12

Parent: "Playing on the iPad or console is a lot of fun, I know. But we also need time for homework, dinner, and other fun things like biking or reading. Let's think about a typical school day: after homework and chores, how much time do you think is fair for playing games or watching videos?"

This invites the child to do some time-budgeting with you. A child in this age range might suggest a number (say, an hour)—giving you a starting point to either agree or adjust gently. By letting them propose an amount, you encourage them to reflect on their own routine. (You can guide them: "Well, you get home at 4 and bedtime is 9, so…") This way, they feel the limit is based on logic (only so many hours free) rather than an arbitrary rule.

Ages 13–15

Parent: "It's really hard to step away from the screen when you're in the middle of something fun or talking to friends, I get that. Instead of me laying down the law about it, can we figure out some limits together that we both think are fair? I want your input so it doesn't feel one-sided."

A young teen or middle teenager will appreciate being treated with this respect. This phrasing explicitly says you don't want to dictate unilaterally. You might be surprised—many teens will suggest reasonable limits when given the chance. For example, your teen might say, "How about I do all my homework first, then I can have two hours online, and be off by 10 PM?" If the suggestion is in the ballpark, you can refine it together. The key is that by negotiating, you're teaching them communication and compromise. They also learn why the limit exists (e.g., need for sleep, homework, family time), rather than just feeling it's a random rule. Research suggests that teens find negotiated rules more acceptable and are more willing to follow them.

Ages 16–18

Parent: "It's really hard to step away from the screen when you're in the middle of something fun or talking to friends, I get that. Instead of me laying down the law about it, can we figure out some limits together that we both think are fair? I want your input so it doesn't feel one-sided."

For older teens nearing adulthood, framing it in terms of their goals (college, jobs, health, etc.) can be effective. You are essentially acting as a coach or advisor rather than a rule-enforcer. You're asking them to self-evaluate first. Many 16–18 year-olds will acknowledge, for example, "Yeah, I procrastinate by watching YouTube and then I'm up too late." If they acknowledge the issue, you can follow up with, "What do you think would be a good way to handle that? Maybe setting a cutoff time at night?" and work together from there. Involving them in problem solving shows respect for their growing autonomy and can help them internalize the importance of balance.

When setting boundaries collaboratively, it's important to be clear about nonnegotiables versus areas of flexibility. For instance, you might say: "We have to make sure you get at least 8 hours of sleep (non-negotiable for health), but how you manage your evening schedule to make that happen can be something we decide together." This way the teen knows you are not just waiting to say "yes" to everything—there are firm principles guiding the discussion. Within those principles, they have room to make choices. Parenting experts note that this approach—sometimes called autonomy-supportive parenting—can lead to better adherence and less rebellion compared to a strict top-down approach. Teens learn decision-making skills and feel respected, which in turn strengthens the parent/caregiver-teen relationship.

About Gaming

Research Insight

Digital games are a double-edged sword in adolescence—moderate use can provide social connection, cognitive stimulation, and entertainment, but excessive gaming can interfere with sleep, academics, and real-life responsibilities. It's helpful for parents/caregivers to acknowledge the potential positive aspects of gaming while still addressing limits. Research has found that playing video games can have benefits such as improved problem-solving skills, creativity, and social interaction (especially in cooperative or team-based games). Many teens also use gaming as a way to de-stress or bond with friends.

However, heavy gaming (to the point of "overuse") is associated with issues like declining grades, reduced physical activity, irritability, and even symptoms of addiction in some cases. The World Health Organization has recognized "gaming disorder" as a condition in extreme cases of addictive play, and surveys suggest a small percentage of youth struggle to control their gaming. The key is balance: helping your teen enjoy games as one part of a rich life, rather than as the dominant activity. By empathizing with what they love about games and then working together on boundaries, parents/caregivers can guide teens to healthier gaming habits.

Conversation starters for discussing gaming habits and setting limits:

Ages 10–12

Parent: "Gaming is really fun, and I can see how excited you are when you play. How do you feel after a really long gaming session? Do you notice if it makes you super tired or maybe a bit cranky when it's time to stop? What do you think is a fair amount of time to play each day so you still have time for homework and other stuff?"

This approach gets the child to reflect on the effects of prolonged gaming (self-awareness) and invites them to suggest a daily time limit. By framing it as "fair amount of time," you signal that you're not trying to take away their fun entirely, just looking for fairness to other activities. Try to use gentle guidance ("Let's remember you also need time for dinner, homework, and relaxing before bed") to arrive at a reasonable limit together. Citing expert guidelines can help—for example, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends around 1 hour on school days for entertainment screen time at this age—but the key is that the child feels involved in the decision.

Ages 13–15

Parent: "I know you love gaming, and I think it's great how you and your friends team up online. I also want to make sure gaming doesn't interfere with your other priorities, like school and sleep. How do you feel about us setting some reasonable limits so it stays enjoyable and doesn't take over everything else?"

Here, you start by praising the social aspect ("team up with friends") and acknowledging it's something positive in their life. Then you express your concern in terms of shared goals—not just "I say so," but because you also care about their school and sleep. By asking "how do you feel about setting some limits," you're opening the door for them to participate.

A young teen might respond with something like, "Okay, what were you thinking?" or even propose a plan themselves. Be ready with a specific suggestion (e.g., "How about no games until homework is done, and then at 9 PM we switch off for the night?"), but invite their input or tweaks. Research suggests that when teens perceive rules as protecting their well-being (and not just arbitrary),

they are more likely to agree with them. You can even mention a fact: "I read that too much gaming late at night can really mess up sleep, and I know staying sharp for school is important to you." This shows it's not just about your preference—it's backed by knowledge of health effects.

Ages 16–18

Parent: "Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like gaming is a pretty big part of your life right now. I don't necessarily think that's bad—there are a lot of worse things a teenager could be doing! As you're getting closer to adulthood though, I want to be sure I'm supporting you as you balance all your activities and roles. What do you think you might need to do differently (if anything) to keep gaming in balance with, say, studying, a job, or other goals you have?"

This approach is almost peer-to-peer. You're literally giving them the floor to critique their own habits. You also acknowledge that, comparatively, gaming is not a terrible hobby (which many teens will appreciate hearing, given how often they might feel lectured about games). This sets a collaborative tone.

A 16–18-year-old might say, "Yeah, I know I spend a lot of time on it. Maybe I should cut back when exams start," or they might downplay the issue. If they don't see a problem, you can gently offer observations: "I did notice you were really stressed last minute finishing that project. Think staying up late gaming might've played a part?" Keep it conversational. At this age, you can even talk about self-regulation strategies as if you're coaching them: for example, using phone alarms or the console's timer to remind them to stop, or prioritizing tasks before play. Emphasize that managing leisure and responsibilities is a skill that will serve them well in college/work life.

Setting gaming boundaries might involve concrete rules like "no gaming until after homework," "devices out of the bedroom at night," or "no games past 10 PM," tailored to your child. Enforcing consequences (like loss of gaming privileges for a day) can be part of the plan, but whenever possible, make the teen part of deciding what the consequences should be. For example, ask, "What do you think should happen if the agreed time limit is ignored?" Teens are often surprisingly fair—they might say, "I guess I'd lose the Xbox the next day if I break the rule." When they articulate the consequence themselves, it can feel less like a punishment and more like upholding an agreement.

Importantly, acknowledge the positives of gaming during your talks. You might say, "I know gaming is where you socialize with friends and unwind. I don't want to take that away—I just want to ensure it's in addition to other important things, not instead of them." By showing you see the good in gaming, your teen is more likely to trust that your goal is to help them, not just control them.

Research published in *American Psychologist* notes that video games can provide "immersive and compelling social, cognitive, and emotional experiences" that may enhance well-being, so it's okay to recognize gaming isn't all bad. Your role is to help your teen enjoy those benefits without falling into the pitfalls of overuse.

In addition to overuse of gaming, it also may be important for you to talk to your teen about the content of the games they play. For example, you may say, "I understand you want to play Grand Theft Auto, and it is really popular with your friends. I am concerned about the violent content in this game and the rating from the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) indicates this game is for someone older (Mature 17+). What game within the Everyone or Everyone 10+ rating could you choose instead?"

This allows the adolescent to have choice within boundaries—out of all the games within a particular rating, which one would they like to play?

Another approach (perhaps for an older adolescent) might be saying, "I know you love gaming and it really gives you a lot of excitement and energy. However, violent video games are actually designed to increase your adrenaline, which can cause you to feel more angry and agitated over time. I am not comfortable with you taking this risk. What other non-violent games would you choose instead that allow you to connect with your friends if Grand Theft Auto is not something I can support?"

Again, this conversation starter includes two important pieces: choice within boundaries. When discussing the content of video games, it might be helpful to also discuss shared family values and consider which games align with those values and which ones do not. It is important for parents/caregivers to be informed about the games their teen would like to play and research the degree of violence, sexuality, and use of crude or inappropriate language in the game. This is where reviewing the game's rating (esrb.org) and conducting internet searches about the game can be helpful.

About Social Media

Conversation starters for discussing gaming habits and setting limits:

Given that many social media platforms have a minimum age requirement of 13, we start our example conversations for adolescents aged 13–15. For younger adolescents, parents can discuss the minimum age requirement and even show them the minimum age requirement on the social media platform's website. Importantly, just because the platform requires a minimum age of 13, that does not mean it is the appropriate age for youth to use social media. In fact, a recent study of professionals who work with youth indicated that 16 is the most commonly suggested age for social media use among adolescents.

Ages 13–15

Parent: "Social media is a cool way to stay in touch with friends and see fun stuff, right? But sometimes it can also make us feel left out or upset—you've heard of FOMO, right? Fear of missing out? I know you're just starting to use apps like [TikTok/ Instagram/etc.]. How do you feel after you spend time on them? Have you ever seen something online that made you feel sad or left out?"

This question gently introduces the idea that it's normal to have mixed feelings. If your teen felt left out (for example, seeing friends in a photo from a gathering they weren't invited to), it gives them a chance to express that hurt. If they mostly feel good, that's fine too. The key is showing you're open to talking about negative feelings if they come up. You can share your own example: "Sometimes I see pictures of my friends' vacations and I feel a bit jealous—even adults feel that!" Normalizing these feelings helps them feel comfortable.

Ages 16–18

Parent: "Social media is everywhere, and it's probably going to be part of life for a long time. I know you use it to keep up with friends and events. I'm curious, do you ever feel like you have to keep up on social media itself—like responding to everyone, keeping streaks, or posting often so people don't forget you? I've heard some teens feel a lot of pressure from that. How is it for you? If you ever do feel that pressure, maybe we can figure out how to make it feel less overwhelming."

Older teens often have a more mature take on social media; some might say, "Yeah, I use it but I don't care about people liking my posts as much as I used to," while others might still feel wrapped up in it. Asking open-ended questions lets them reflect on their own experience. If your teen acknowledges stress ("It actually is a lot sometimes, like I feel I have to answer messages right away"), you can discuss strategies such as turning off notifications during homework or at night, or setting specific times of day to check social media instead of constant checking.

If your teen says it isn't a problem, you can still gently share some insight: "That's good. I do worry sometimes because I see stories about how social media can affect mental health. If you ever feel overwhelmed or like it's affecting you, know you can always talk to me. We can figure out ways to make it healthier." This keeps the door open. It's also an opportunity to talk about digital footprints and privacy. You might say, "As you get closer to applying to colleges or jobs, remember what you post can stick around. I'm here if you ever want to review privacy settings or think about how your posts might be seen by others in the future." While not directly about overuse, this is an important related topic for older teens.

In all these discussions, ensure you are not just highlighting negatives. Celebrate the positives too: maybe your teen learned a new skill from a YouTube tutorial or got inspired by someone's art on Instagram. Taking a balanced view builds credibility—your teen sees you're not "anti-social media," you just want it to be a healthy space for them.

You might suggest doing a "social media audit" together: Go through the accounts they follow (or even your own) and ask, "Does this account make you feel good, inspired, educated? Or does it make you feel bad about yourself or anxious?" Encourage them to unfollow or mute accounts that bring them down. This empowers them to shape a healthier online environment.

Setting boundaries for social media

For younger teens, you may still have direct limits like no devices in the bedroom at night, using parental controls, or requiring access to the platforms they use. For older teens, outright control is harder; instead, focus on agreements around usage that they can self-enforce, such as "no phones at the dinner table" or "turn off screens an hour before bed to protect your sleep." Explain the reasoning (blue light affects sleep, constant notifications can increase anxiety, etc.) rather than saying, "because I said so."

The American Psychological Association in 2023 recommended that parents/caregivers monitor younger adolescents' social media use and coach them in safe use. This could mean you regularly check their privacy settings or discuss what they see online. As they demonstrate responsibility, you can grant more independence.

Finally, encourage digital media breaks. You might try a family "no social media Sunday morning" or similar, where everyone, including parents/caregivers, unplugs for a while. Frame it as a way to recharge and spend time in the real world. Teens often respond well if the whole family participates (and they love seeing parents/caregivers forced to put down their phones too!). Many teens report feeling relieved when they disconnect, even if they experience a little FOMO (fear of missing out) at first. By practicing moderation yourself and showing that life goes on without social media, you model a healthy relationship with technology.

About Pornography

Research Insight

Talking about online pornography can feel awkward, but having open, nonjudgmental conversations is one of the best ways to protect teens from the potential harms of pornographic content. Many adolescents will come across porn online—whether by choice or by accident—and if parents/caregivers never address it, teens are left with the internet's often distorted portrayal of sex as their teacher. Research shows that most teens have seen pornography by their mid-teens, and while many parents/caregivers want to discuss it, they often hesitate due to embarrassment or not knowing how.

The result is a communication gap: teens might feel they can't bring it up, and parents/caregivers hope ignoring it will make it go away. Experts in adolescent psychology and sexual health strongly recommend that parents/caregivers proactively talk to children about pornography in an age-appropriate way. The key is to reassure your teen they won't get in trouble for being curious, while explaining that porn does not reflect real sex or real relationships. Instead, it often shows extreme or unrealistic scenarios that can give false ideas about consent, body image, and intimacy.

By keeping a calm, factual tone and avoiding shaming, you make it more likely your teen will come to you with questions or concerns in the future. Remember, if you don't talk to them, the internet (or peers) will fill that gap, and not always with healthy messages.

Conversation starters for addressing pornography and setting healthy expectations:

Ages 10–12

Parent: "Sometimes when you're online, you might come across pictures or videos of people without clothes on, or doing things that are very private. That's called pornography—it's meant for adults, not children. If you ever see something like that and it confuses or upsets you, you can always talk to me about it. I promise you won't be in trouble; I just want to help answer your questions."

At 10–12, children are likely to have heard the word "porn" or seen a glimpse of something, even if accidentally (like in a pop-up ad or meme). The goal is to define pornography in a simple way and open the door for future conversations. By explicitly saying "you won't be in trouble" you remove the fear and shame that might keep them silent.

If your child admits, "Yeah I saw a weird ad once," you can calmly respond, "That stuff isn't for children, and I'm sorry you saw it. It's okay, you didn't do anything wrong. If you see it again, let me know or just close it. And remember it's not real, it's like actors in a movie." Keep your response short and reassuring. The main message is, "If it pops up, come to me."

Ages 13–15

Parent: "Around your age, a lot of children get curious and might look up 'adult' websites or porn. I understand that curiosity—it's normal to wonder about sex. But I want you to know, what you see in porn isn't what real relationships or sex are like. It's kind of like watching an action movie—exciting, exaggerated, often not showing the consequences or the emotional side. People's bodies in porn don't always represent what normal bodies look like, and the situations can be unrealistic or even disrespectful. I'd much rather you ask me any questions you have than just believe what you see online. What have you heard about porn?"

This approach is direct but non-accusatory. By this age, most teens have been exposed to some form of pornography (whether intentionally or accidentally). You're acknowledging their curiosity without condemning them for it ("I understand… it's normal to wonder"). Then you're providing context about its unrealistic portrayal of consent, safe sex, and real emotions.

Inviting them to share what they've heard opens the conversation. They may be relieved to talk about it because many teens feel confused or guilty about watching porn. If your teen is quiet or embarrassed, you can say, "I know it can be awkward, but I don't want you to feel ashamed. Lots of teens see this stuff. My job is to help you understand it. So just know, anytime you have questions—even if it's years from now—you can ask me."

Ages 16–18

Parent: "I'm sure you've seen or at least come across porn online—that's almost a given these days. As you get closer to adulthood, I think it's really important we can talk about this openly. I want you to have healthy, respectful relationships in your life, and porn can be really misleading in that area. It often shows extremes and leaves out things like love, communication, and consent. I'd love to hear your thoughts on it—like how do you feel about what you might have seen? And do you have any questions or concerns? I promise to be honest and not judge your feelings. I was a teenager once too, and I remember it was hard to get good information."

With older teens, you can be quite candid. By 16–18, many teens have a pretty formed perspective on porn (some might be avid viewers, others turned off by it, others indifferent). By speaking to them almost adult-to-adult, you signal respect for their maturity. It's important to connect pornography to values and real-life expectations: for example, you can discuss how consuming a lot of porn can affect one's views of partners or sex. (Some research suggests that heavy porn use can lead to unrealistic expectations or even addiction-like behavior in certain individuals, which you can mention if relevant.)

Keep the focus on healthy relationships: what does your teen think a loving relationship looks like, and how does porn differ from that? This gets them to critically analyze the content. Also, be prepared to offer resources—perhaps there's a good website or book about sexual health for teens that you trust, which you can recommend if they want to learn more privately. Emphasize that curiosity about sex is normal and that seeking accurate information (from you or trusted sources) is far better than learning from pornography.

Throughout all age levels, avoid shaming language. For example, instead of saying "Porn will destroy your mind" or "It's disgusting, never watch it," use a factual, calm tone. You might say, "Porn is made to get viewers excited, but it doesn't show real intimacy or respect. It's okay to be curious, but I want you to learn what's real and healthy." As one child psychologist puts it, when talking about sexual content with children, "It's not to shame or moralize." The point is to educate and keep communication open.

Also, set some basic boundaries: for younger children, use filters or parental controls to reduce accidental exposure. For teens, you might still keep devices out of bedrooms at night or check browser histories if agreed upon, but remember that outright bans often fail (tech-savvy teens find workarounds). Instead, appeal to their reasoning: discuss the potential negative effects of too much porn (such as distorted expectations about sex or even addiction). Some families set a rule like "no porn on family Wi-Fi"—not that it can be 100% enforced, but it's a values statement that you don't endorse it.

If your teen is already watching porn regularly, approach it as a concern for their well-being, not as a violation to punish. You could say, "I know you've been watching porn. I'm not here to yell at you. I am concerned because I care about you and want you to learn about sex in a healthier way. Let's talk about what interests you and find better sources for that information." If needed, involve a healthcare provider or therapist to discuss it—sometimes an outside voice helps. Remember to reassure them that sexual feelings are normal; it's just that porn is not a great teacher for those feelings.

Finally, emphasize healthy relationships and consent as the core lesson. Make sure your teen knows that real-life intimacy should be respectful, mutual, and never coerced. Porn rarely shows consent or mutual respect. So you might say, "In real life, both people check in with each other. They care about each other's comfort and pleasure. You won't see that in most porn, but it's super important in real relationships." By reinforcing these values, you help your teen develop a critical lens for any inappropriate content they might encounter and prepare them for healthier experiences in the future.

About Gambling and Sports Betting

Research Insight

Today's teens can be exposed to gambling in surprising ways—not just at a casino or through lottery tickets, but through their video games (loot boxes, "gacha" games, casino minigames) and the explosion of online sports betting. Many popular games include loot boxes, which are packs or boxes with random items that players can buy with real money; these mimic the experience of gambling because you're staking money on a chance outcome.

Researchers have found a significant link between teens spending money on loot boxes and developing problem gambling behaviors. In other words, the more a teenager gambles within games, the higher the risk of real gambling problems later. Meanwhile, sports betting has become widely accessible via apps, and even though underage gambling is illegal, a lot of youth find ways around age checks. Statistics are sobering: in one study, 60–80% of high schoolers reported gambling money in the past year (this could be betting on sports, card games, online bets, etc.), and around 5–6% of teens meet criteria for a gambling addiction or problem.

Experts warn that adolescents are at higher risk of developing gambling disorders than adults because the teen brain is still developing impulse control and risk evaluation abilities. Given these risks, it's crucial to talk to your teen about what gambling is and why it can be dangerous, even if it starts innocently (like buying a loot box or betting $5 on a game with friends). Emphasize that the "house" (the game or the betting platform) is designed to make money, meaning players usually lose in the long run. Encourage a mindset of skepticism toward "easy money" schemes and an understanding of odds. Setting clear rules (for example, no real-money gaming purchases without permission, or a firm family stance against underage betting) can help prevent impulsive decisions that lead to losses or debt. Most importantly, keep the conversation nonjudgmental: if your teen admits to having gambled, focus on education and solutions, not punishment.

Conversation starters for discussing gambling and gambling-like games:

Ages 10–12

Parent: "You know how some of your games ask if you want to buy coins or a mystery box to get a cool item? That's actually a bit like gambling—you spend money but you're not sure what you'll get. It's designed to make you want to spend more and more to get the good stuff. I want you to know about this because it can be risky. Have you seen anything like that in the games you play?"

Children in this age group might not connect those game features with "gambling," so you're educating them. Many games aimed at youth do have loot boxes or in-game purchases that have random outcomes. Let them describe what they've encountered. Perhaps they've wanted to buy a box in Fortnite or FIFA packs or similar. Explain in simple terms: "It's like a slot machine in Vegas—you put in money and hope you win a big prize, but often you don't."

By demystifying it, you help them make wiser choices. You can make a rule: "In our family, we don't spend real money on those random prize boxes"—and crucially, explain why: "because it can lead to wasting a lot of money for nothing, and it can even get people hooked on the thrill of it." If your child has already spent money (maybe using your card unbeknownst to you), stay calm and use it as a teaching moment: show them the receipt, talk about what else that money could have bought, and perhaps set up parental controls to prevent unauthorized purchases.

Ages 13–15

Parent: "I want to talk about something that doesn't get talked about much—gambling. Sometimes it shows up in unexpected places, like video games (those loot boxes or casino-like minigames) or those fantasy sports and betting apps that everyone's advertising. They make it look easy to win money. But the truth is, they're designed so that most people lose money. Have you ever seen this kind of thing or been tempted to try it—like maybe some of your friends betting on an NFL game or buying packs in a game? Let's chat about why it's usually best to stay away from that."

This is a direct approach that assumes the teen has some exposure or at least knowledge (which they likely do; by early high school they might hear peers talk about March Madness brackets, fantasy leagues, or even using an older sibling's betting app). By treating them as smart and capable of understanding, you invite a more mature conversation.

If they say, "Yeah, I've seen those loot boxes" or "My friends and I played poker with quarters," use that as a springboard. You can share facts: for example, "Did you know that even professional gamblers mostly lose? The games are stacked against you." Or "I read about children who started with video game loot boxes and later had trouble with real gambling. I just don't want that to happen to you." Keep the tone caring: you're not accusing them of doing something wrong, you're educating. If the teen shows interest or has gambled, ask them, "What do you enjoy about it?" If it's the thrill or competition, acknowledge that feeling and discuss safer ways to get it (maybe competitive sports, or games that don't involve money).

It can also be helpful to set a family rule: e.g., "No using real money for in-app purchases or bets without parental approval." This covers a lot—from loot boxes to any online bets. They may roll their eyes, but at least expectations are clear.

Ages 16–18

Parent: "Sports betting and gambling apps have gotten super popular, and I'm aware that even though you're under 18, there are probably ways teens find to use them. I care about you and your financial future, so I want to make sure you understand the risks. Have you ever thought about betting on something, or maybe tried a little gambling like at a friend's house or online? Be honest—I'm not here to punish, I just want to talk openly. What do you think about all this and do you understand how the odds work?"

Older teens are on the cusp of full legal access to gambling (at 18 for some things, 21 for others in many places), so it's crucial they get accurate information now. By inviting honesty, you might learn that your teen has already placed bets (many teens do small-time bets with friends or through shady online means). If they have, try not to react with anger.

Instead, commend their honesty and pivot to guidance: "Okay, I appreciate you telling me. Let's look at what could happen if this continues…" You can use real examples—there are plenty of stories of young people falling into debt or addictive behavior due to online gambling. For instance, mention how easy it is to lose track: "Those apps have you link a credit card; people have lost thousands before they realized it."

Discuss the house edge (the mathematical advantage casinos/betting platforms have)—maybe even do a simple demonstration or math problem together to show how odds are not in the player's favor. Older teens might also be enticed by things like crypto casinos or informal betting rings; stress that these are unregulated and even more prone to scams. Emphasize that gambling can be addictive—it triggers a rush in the brain much like a drug, especially when you win once and then chase that feeling.

Highlight that adolescent brains are especially vulnerable to developing addictions because their impulse control isn't fully mature yet. This isn't to instill fear, but to arm them with knowledge: "Your brain gets a big hit of dopamine when you win, and it remembers that—making you want to do it again. But you can't control when you win, it's mostly luck, so people end up chasing losses."

Also, make a plan with them: If they ever do feel like gambling or find themselves drawn to it, what can they do? For example, promise that they can come to you and you'll help them find help, without shame. If they owe money, you'll work out a way to settle it together rather than them feeling they have to hide it (teens in gambling debt have been known to steal or do dangerous things out of panic—an open line of help can prevent that).

Setting boundaries and monitoring

For younger adolescents, definitely use parental controls on app stores to prevent downloads of gambling apps or games rated for adults. Be aware of the games your child plays—if they have loot boxes or microtransactions, consider disabling in-app purchases or at least having the password so they have to ask you. For all ages, you might ban any real-money betting in your house. If you as a parent/caregiver gamble (like buying lottery tickets or betting on sports occasionally), discuss it openly so they see an example of moderation—or reconsider involving teens in it. For instance, avoid asking a teen to help fill out your March Madness bracket with money on the line, as that can normalize gambling.

Encourage alternative activities and watch for warning signs

Maybe suggest stock market simulation games or entrepreneurial projects for a teen who likes risk/reward (though the stock market is not gambling when done wisely, it can satisfy the itch to predict outcomes and see results, with educational value). Or channel their competitive spirit into esports or regular sports that don't involve money.

If your teen suddenly has money or is constantly short on cash, or becomes very secretive with their device, it could be a sign of betting. Instead of spying, have regular check-ins: "How's that FIFA Ultimate Team going? You're not spending real money on packs without telling me, right?" said with a light tone but serious intent. Reiterate that gambling is especially risky for young people, and that even adults can get caught in bad cycles. By instilling a healthy skepticism about gambling ("the house always wins in the long run"), you prepare them to resist the temptation as they gain full legal access in adulthood.

Resources

American Psychological Association (2023). *Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence*. **https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use** (APA's guidance emphasizes parental monitoring, media literacy, and limiting social comparison on social platforms)

Dawson, K., Gabhainn, S. N., Friday, R., & MacNeela, P. (2023). Barriers and recommendations for parent–child conversations about pornography. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, Article 11080982. **https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sociology/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1349549/full** (Research study finding that embarrassment and not knowing how to start are common barriers preventing parents from talking to adolescents about porn, despite parental concern about the issue)

Children's Screen Time Action Network at Fairplay. (Oct. 15, 2020). Dear Parents: A Digital Well-Being Resource from Teens to Parents. **https://screentimenetwork.org/resource/dear-parents-digital-well-being-resource-teens-parents** (Teens share how they want parents to listen to and speak with them on tough subjects like cell phone use)

Developmental Science (Blog). (Nov. 30, 2017). Teenagers Might Have a Problem With Respect But It's Not the One You Think. **https://www.developmentalscience.com/blog/2017/11/29/teenagers-might-have-a-problem-with-respect-but-its-not-the-one-you-think** (Explains that teens are more likely to cooperate when they feel respected and have autonomy; notes studies that teens comply with rules seen as fair and resist those seen as arbitrary)

Doucleff, M. (2023, May 9). Major psychologists' group warns of social media's potential harm to kids. *NPR – Shots Health News*. **https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/05/09/1174838633/psychologists-issue-health-advisory-for-teens-and-social-media** (Summarizes APA recommendations; notes rising teen depression and advises parents to protect children online)

Frank, C. (2020). How to Talk to Teenagers About Porn. *Child Mind Institute*. (Advice from clinical psychologists on calmly discussing pornography with teens, emphasizing that parents/caregivers should not shame or guilt teens, and explaining that porn is not an accurate portrayal of sex or bodies) **https://childmind.org/article/how-to-talk-to-teenagers-about-porn/**

Giordano, A. L., Ramsay-Seaner, K., Letcher, A., Crawford, C., & Kim, Y. (under review). Most concerning youth risk behaviors: A survey of professionals who work with youth.

Granic, I., Lobel, A., & Engels, R. C. (2014). The Benefits of Playing Video Games. *American Psychologist, 69*, 66-78. **https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0034857** (Reviews research showing video games can provide cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social benefits for youth, in addition to potential risks)

Hannay, C. (July 26, 2022). How to Validate Teens (Even When You Don't Agree). *Center for Adolescent Studies*. **https://centerforadolescentstudies.com/how-to-validate-teens-even-when-you-dont-agree/** (Provides examples of teens responding positively when their perspective is validated rather than dismissed—validation leading to reduced resistance)

Leonard, J. (May 5, 2016). Study: For Moms and Teens, Emotions Matter During Conflict. *UC Merced News*. **https://chancellor.ucmerced.edu/news/2016/study-moms-and-teens-emotions-matter-during-conflict** (Covers Professor Alexandra Main's research finding that mutual validation between parents and teens leads to more satisfying conflict resolution)

Livingston, J. (June 13, 2020). "Speak Less and Listen More When Talking to Teens." *MacArthur Medical Center Blog*. **https://macarthurmc.com/speak-less-and-listen-more/**. (Emphasizes asking open-ended questions and practicing active listening; notes that giving direct advice often triggers teen defensiveness, whereas sharing stories and empathy encourages them to listen)

Petry, N. M. (n.d.) Healthy Limits on Video Games. *Child Mind Institute* (excerpt from Pause and Reset). **https://childmind.org/article/healthy-limits-on-video-games/** (Offers guidance on setting time limits for gaming; cites AAP recommendation of ~1 hour on school days for children over 6, and notes problems that arise with excessive gaming like school issues or lost interest in other activities)

Raising Children Network (Australia). (October 12, 2025). Talking with teenagers about pornography at 12-18 years: parenting tips. **https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/entertainment-technology/pornography-sexting/pornography-talking-with-teens** (Recommends casual, frequent conversations about pornography to build trust; suggests explaining porn's unrealistic nature and focusing on healthy, respectful relationships and consent in discussions)

Responsible Gambling Council. (n.d.). Gambling and Your Teenager – Statistics. **https://responsiblegambling.org/for-the-public/safer-play/teens-and-gambling/** (Provides data on youth gambling; for example, around 1 in 10 adolescents have gambled online recently, and about 5% of adolescents exhibit problem gambling behaviors)

Sedona Sky Academy. (March 21, 2024.). Tips for Communicating With Your Teen. **https://www.sedonasky.org/blog/tips-for-communicating-with-your-teen** (Highlights the role of active listening, validation, and empathy in reducing teen defensiveness and building trust in communication)

Sproutable (Podcast Episode 554). (2021). Conflict to Connection – Parenting Teens with Empathy and Understanding. **https://www.besproutable.com/podcasts/eps-554-conflict-to-connection-parenting-teens-with-empathy-amp-understanding/** (Discusses how using empathy and collaborative problem solving in parent-teen conflicts can transform opposition into cooperation, reinforcing the importance of staying emotionally connected)

Think:Kids. (n.d.) Collaborative Problem Solving for Parents. *Massachusetts General Hospital*. **https://thinkkids.org/Parents/** (Dr. Stuart Ablon's Collaborative Problem Solving approach is designed to help children develop the skills needed to deal with challenging problems)

Vogels, E. A., & Gelles-Watnick, R. (April 24, 2023). Teens and social media: Key findings from Pew Research Center surveys. Pew Research Center. **https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/24/teens-and-social-media-key-findings-from-pew-research-center-surveys/** (Reports that 80% of teens feel more connected via social media, while significant numbers feel pressure and negativity as well)

Weintraub, A., Lang, S., & Lorenzo, S. (December 8, 2022). Online gambling among youth worries experts, one teen says sports betting was an 'escape.' *ABC News*. **https://abcnews.go.com/US/online-gambling-youth-worries-experts-teen-sports-betting/story?id=94577595** (News report including statistics that 60–80% of high schoolers have gambled for money in the past year, ~5% are addicted; features expert Dr. Timothy Fong explaining why teens are at higher risk for gambling problems due to brain development)

Zendle, D., Meyer, R., Over, H. (2019). Adolescents and loot boxes: links with problem gambling and motivations for purchase. *Royal Society Open Science, 6*(6): 190049. **https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31312481/** (Large-scale study showing a significant correlation between loot box spending and problem gambling among 16–18 year-olds, suggesting that gambling-like microtransactions in games can be a pathway to gambling issues)

(All online resources accessed and verified in March 2025.)

Scan for full Guide and resources

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