

THE GROUP CHAT TALK

5 things to tell your son this week

START HERE

This is not about assuming the worst.

We all want to believe: not our kid, not his friends, not his group chat. Unfortunately, that's not reality.

Group chats have become an everyday part of how teens and young adults socialize. But the distance and perceived privacy of a device can lower inhibitions, blur boundaries and make harmful choices feel less immediate. Content can be saved, shared and seen far beyond the original chat - often with consequences no one considered in the moment.

Your son doesn't need a lecture about "being careful online." He needs to know what to do when a chat contains harmful content, describes harm that happened offline or is being used to target someone.

1 Tell him nothing in a group chat is private.

What feels temporary on a screen can follow another person for a long time.

Messages can be copied, recorded or shown to people outside the chat, even when an app says they disappear. Once a photo, video or story is shared, the person at the centre of it may have no control over who sees it, where it travels or how long it lasts.

Reactions, jokes and repeated sharing can increase the harm. The point is not whether your son will get caught. The point is that someone else can lose control of something deeply personal in seconds.

SAY: "Assume anything shared in a group chat can travel beyond it. If it is private, humiliating or not yours to share, do not post it, forward it or react to it."

That's the rule. No such thing as "but it was on disappearing mode."

2 Tell him not sending it doesn't automatically keep him out of it.

The first question is not "Will I get in trouble?" It is "Am I helping this get worse?"

Not every bad group-chat moment looks obviously serious at first. It might be a humiliating photo, a cruel joke, a rumour about what happened at a party, or a video that was never meant to be shared.

If your son stays, reacts, piles on or forwards it, he can give the content a bigger audience and make the situation worse for the person being targeted. That is the main reason to act.

Acknowledge the social risk honestly. Leaving can feel like snitching. Speaking up can feel like choosing against his friends or teammates. But the risk of an awkward moment with the group is smaller than the risk of helping something harmful spread.

There may also be consequences for him. Messages and reactions can make him look involved, and school, team or legal consequences may follow. But avoiding consequences should not be the headline reason for doing the right thing.

SAY: "You don't have to investigate it, fix it or make a big speech. But don't help it spread. Don't react, forward it or pile on. If it feels wrong, step back. If it seems serious, tell me or another trusted adult right away."

3 Give him a plan for what to do next.

"Make good choices" is not a plan. Give him different responses for different situations.

IF SOMETHING FEELS WRONG, UNCOMFORTABLE OR SIMPLY ISN'T HIS TO SHARE

It might be a mean joke, an embarrassing photo, a rumour, a sexual comment or something that could create a bigger problem for everyone in the chat.

1 DON'T ADD TO IT. Don't react, joke, comment or forward it.

2 USE A SHORT EXIT LINE IF IT FEELS SAFE. He can say, "Don't send that to me," "That's not ours to share," or "I'm not getting involved in this."

3 STEP AWAY. Leave the chat if he can. If leaving would inflame the situation, stop participating and talk to you or another trusted adult about what to do next.

He does not have to decide whether the content is "bad enough" before stepping back.

IF IT INVOLVES HARASSMENT, THREATS, VIOLENCE, INTIMATE IMAGES OR SOMETHING THAT MAY BE ILLEGAL

This is no longer something he should try to handle alone.

1 DO NOT SAVE THE IMAGE OR VIDEO. Do not screenshot, download, save or forward the harmful content itself. Do not create another copy.

2 TELL A TRUSTED ADULT IMMEDIATELY. That could be a parent, school counsellor, coach or another safe adult.

3 IF IT IS SAFE, NOTE THE BASIC DETAILS WITHOUT REOPENING THE CONTENT. Who posted it, when it appeared and which chat it was in.

4 REPORT IT TO THE PLATFORM. For help removing intimate images, families can contact NeedHelpNow.ca in Canada or Take It Down by NCMEC in the United States.

5 TREAT AN IMMEDIATE THREAT AS AN EMERGENCY. If someone appears to be in immediate danger, contact emergency services.

IF HE DOES NOT FEEL ABLE TO TELL AN ADULT HE KNOWS

Make sure he knows that "tell a trusted adult" does not have to mean telling a parent, coach or teacher face-to-face.

1 CONTACT AN ANONYMOUS SUPPORT SERVICE. In Canada, he can call Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 for anonymous, confidential support. In the United States, RAINN offers anonymous, confidential support when sexual harm may be involved at 1-800-656-4673.

2 USE AN INSTITUTIONAL REPORTING SYSTEM. Look for a safe-sport, safeguarding, student-safety or anonymous-reporting page offered by his school, team, league or organization. Check whether it is truly anonymous or only confidential, because the rules vary.

3 CONTACT CRIME STOPPERS FOR SUSPECTED CRIMINAL ACTIVITY. Find the program serving your area through CanadianCrimeStoppers.org or CrimeStoppersUSA.org. Provide the basic information you know, but do not investigate, seek out more information or submit an intimate image or video.

4 CALL EMERGENCY SERVICES IF SOMEONE IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER. Anonymous tip systems are not a substitute for emergency help.

SAY: "I want you to come to me, but if you ever feel like you can't, that doesn't mean you have to stay silent. You can contact an anonymous support line, use your school or organization's reporting system, or contact Crime Stoppers if you believe something criminal has happened. You do not have to investigate it, prove it or handle it on your own."

4 Make the phone deal now.

Fear can block the conversation you most need to have.

Survey research suggests that fear of losing access to their smartphone is one of the biggest reasons teens do not tell their parents what is happening on it.

So don't make losing the phone the thing standing between you and information you need to work out the right next step and keep the situation from getting worse.

Make the deal before anything happens. If you make it after you're suspicious, it'll sound like a trap. Make sure the deal covers something he did, not only something he witnessed.

SAY: "If you tell me something you saw, or something you did, you will not lose your phone for telling me. That doesn't mean there won't be consequences. It means telling me will never be the reason I punish you."

If your son is older, lives away from home or taking his phone isn't something you'd realistically do, make the same deal about your reaction instead.

The fear might not be "my parents will take my phone." It might be "my mom will call my coach," "my dad will lose it," "they'll tell my agent," or "they'll take over before I can explain what happened."

SAY: "If you call me about something serious, I will listen to the whole story before I react. I won't start making calls or decisions while you're still trying to tell me what happened. We'll figure out what needs to happen next together."

The point isn't promising there will never be consequences. It's making sure fear of your immediate reaction doesn't keep him quiet while someone else continues to be harmed.

You want honesty to move him toward help, accountability and stopping further harm - not teach him to hide things better.

5 Have the 15-minute talk, even if he doesn't want to have it.

You're probably going to get some version of "I knowww, Mom," "I know, Dad," "This doesn't happen in our group chat," or "My friends aren't like that."

Good. You don't need him to agree that this applies to him. You don't need him to admit he's ever seen something questionable. And you definitely don't need to turn it into an interrogation.

You just need him to know what to do if he's ever wrong about that.

Don't get pulled into arguing about whether his teammates would do something like this. That's not the point.

SAY: "I hope you're right. I'm not asking you to tell me anything about your friends. I'm making sure that if something ever does happen, you already know what to do and you know you can call me."

If you get the eye roll and another "I know," let him have it.

SAY: "Perfect. Then this will take fifteen minutes. I read something this week and I want you protected. Hear me out, and then we're done."

Then go through these five things. Don't require a heart-to-heart. Don't force him to tell you what's happening in every chat. Don't mistake discomfort for the conversation not working.

He can be embarrassed, annoyed and barely looking up from his phone and still hear you.

The goal isn't a great conversation. The goal is that six months from now, if something bad appears in a group chat at 1:00 a.m., he remembers exactly what you told him to do.

THIS WEEK

Four small actions. One clearer plan.

- ☐ Have the 15-minute talk, eye rolls allowed.
- ☐ Say the phone/reaction deal out loud.
- ☐ Ask which team group chats he's in.
- ☐ Find your child's school, team or league reporting options now.

Keep this page somewhere easy to find. The best time to decide what your family will do is before a difficult message lands.

IF SOMEONE HAS ALREADY BEEN HURT

Confidential support is available, and the person harmed is never to blame.

Canada

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868

NeedHelpNow.ca: help reporting and removing intimate images shared online

United States

RAINN: 1-800-656-4673

Take It Down: takeitdown.ncmec.org for eligible images or videos taken before age 18

A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

I'm not a lawyer and this isn't legal advice.

Resources checked October 2, 2026: NeedHelpNow.ca; KidsHelpPhone.ca; TakeltDown.NCMEC.org; RAINN.org.

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