

**Cybercrime, Safety and Well-Being on the Internet
for
Autistic Individuals:
A Booklet for Parents, Caregivers, and Support
Personnel**

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Introduction

The internet can be a wonderful tool and has changed the world in multiple, beneficial ways. Technology in itself is not good or bad, healthy or unhealthy; it is the way it is used that makes the difference in how a person acts, thinks and feels. What affects us is what we choose to view and engage with, and how often we engage.

Most people enjoy aspects of being online and this technology has many benefits; however, computers should not replace real life experiences, human connection and interaction with our environment. There are also dangers to being online and precautions should be taken in order to remain safe.

People from all walks of life can fall victim to online bullying and cybercrime, but [studies](#) have shown that people on the autism spectrum are more susceptible to these online threats. This is because of not understanding social nuances like when someone is lying or knowing something is not quite right – they may not sense these subtleties. There is difficulty determining fact from fiction or opinions, or understanding social cues and internet text/language. Autistic people are more vulnerable to online grooming and can be easily manipulated.

Not only are autistic people at risk from others online, but they can also develop compulsive online habits and internet addictions. Internet use can feed into repetitive or restrictive behaviors. Autistic people can be more deeply affected by exposure to inappropriate content.

While technology does offer a great deal of support and independence to autistic people, prolonged screen time can set the stage for cybercrime as it does take time to become a victim. Time is what a predator needs and multiple opportunities for contact.

Why are autistic individuals drawn to the internet/computers?

There are numerous reasons why an autistic person is drawn to the internet and computers.

- People's use of consistent and easily recognizable emoticons replaces the need to decode people's body language, facial expressions and vocal tone that can be problematic in person-al communications.
- It is less intimidating or stressful than face to face communication.
- There is more response time given with computers.
- The internet is a motivating medium.
- There are less social demands like making eye contact or having to interpret body language.
- There is predictability and a sense of control (can go back to things over and over).

What are the positive aspects of internet/computer use?

Using the internet can help in these areas:

- Planning and organizing such as calendars and schedules.
- If handwriting skills are poor, typing is easier.
- If mouse control is difficult, there is touch screen capability.
- If typing is difficult, there are speech to text programs.
- Connecting with sites that support interests.
- Improving hand-eye coordination through an external device such as a mouse or hand controls.
- The computer thinks visually and is controllable and unthreatening, therefore alleviating stress.
- Can also be therapeutic for play, imagination, sociability, exploration and creativity.

What are the common online risks for autistic people?

There are several common online risks that autistic people face:

Cyberbullying – encompasses spreading gossip, humiliating posts, online threats, sharing pictures and posts without permission, online stalking and hacking a social media account

Sexual Predators – seek out younger or vulnerable victims to sexually abuse. It is estimated there are about 500,000 predators a day online. Children between the ages of 12 and 15 are especially susceptible to be groomed or manipulated by adults they meet online. Autistic youth can be even more vulnerable because of communication deficits, not understanding language nuances, and the inability to assess the nature of a social situation.

Catfishing – happens on dating sites and is rampant. A ‘catfish’ is a person who creates an online dating profile through which they pretend to be somebody else. They might use a fake name, fake pictures, and a fake life story among other things to paint a mental picture of the person they aren’t. This can also happen on social media accounts.

Scams, Manipulation, or Hacking – typical scenarios are asking for money, phishing for personal information to use for identity theft, or trying to get a person to commit a crime on their behalf. It may start by fostering a trusting relationship to gain information about the victim and/or extort money.

Internet Addiction – Autistic people are more prone to internet addiction because of its allure, easier socialization, and obsessive behaviors. Research suggests that a person with “autism traits”, experiencing anxiety, and/or depression is more prone to internet addiction (Ramano 2014)

The Four B's – Creating a Safe Environment

Keeping a person safe online may feel like a daunting task, but we can build support for internet well-being by using the four B's:



1

BE CONFIDENT

If the child is under 18 or you are their legal guardian if over the age of 18, you need to look at content and check devices.

2

BE CURIOUS

Communicate and set boundaries and rules for use – these are a part of safety. Do detective work and see what sites they are visiting or interested in.

3

BE CAUTIOUS

Know what the potential internet risks are. You can learn about the risks on sites like [Connect Safely](#) or [Internet Matters](#)

4

BE PREPARED

Agree what the child or adult can and can't do online. Set out clear rules, boundaries and limits in writing, with visuals, or by using individualized tools. If something goes wrong on the internet, there is help available through sites like [Need Help Now](#) and [Cybertip!](#)

Creating Safety Measures, Rules and Boundaries by Parents and Support Personnel

1. Read the data privacy policy and terms before creating an account for any social media or online group.
2. After creating an account, set and adjust the privacy settings.
3. Limit what content can be accessed. Usually this entails making adjustments to a device's settings as well as the internet browser or app being used. Consider using specific monitoring apps like Qustodio.
4. Consider creating an internet contract with the rules outlined. A contract should include the rule that all passwords should be known by you, and setting the devices so passwords can't be changed. Another rule to consider is how much time will be allowed and when.
5. Periodically check content, chat, and messages. This can help the internet user know that they are accountable to a responsible adult and that the rules and boundaries are going to be monitored to make sure they are being adhered to.
6. Police do scan social media websites so let the child or adult know. Even a private posting mentioning or talking about doing something illegal can be found by the police.
7. Carry out a web search of the child or adult's name regularly to make sure privacy settings are intact and child or adult can't be found by strangers online.
8. Keep the computer in a more open area for monitoring and establish areas for tech device use. (Ex. Don't allow bedroom use. Tech device use before bedtime also interrupts sleep.)

Internet User Rules and Boundaries

For the autistic individual using the internet, consider setting up the following rules and boundaries:

2. Use a screen name that is not your name.



4. Only have friends that you know and trust in the real world



6. Report anyone you don't know who tries to contact you or be friends with you to a responsible adult.

1. Never give out personal information - name, age, school attending, or home address



3. Never upload photos without permission from a responsible adult

5. Not everyone online is who they say they are.



7. Take frequent breaks and limit screen time sessions.



Health and Safety Rules for Computer Use

1. Don't sit too close to the monitor and turn away from the monitor frequently.

2. Take frequent rest breaks.

3. Stand up and stretch every 20-30 minutes.

4. Avoid using the mouse for long periods of time.

5. Sit upright with good posture.



Making the Tools for the Rules

In order for a rule or boundary to be understood and followed, the content has to be understood and shown in a concrete way. This can be done through the use of charts, checklists, graphic organizers, and other visual supports.

For a tool to be meaningful and relevant, it will need to be personalized and specific to the person who will be using it. Let's explore some tools that can be used to support internet safety and well-being.

Charts

Charts are a great way to record computer/device time, look at usage patterns, and list computer activities. It can also make a person more accountable and aware about what they are doing if they can see it on a chart. When you can see the hours accessed over a weekly period, it gives a concrete number. Adjustment to screen times can be made based on that number. (See Appendix 2 of *Online Safety for Children and Teens on the Autism Spectrum* book for these charts)

Computer Log Time Chart

Computer Hours Per Week Chart

Social Networking Activity Chart

SMART Acronym

Follow these SMART rules to be safer online

Safe

Stay safe online by not giving out any personal information.



Meeet

Do not meet anyone you are only friends with online.



Accept

Do not accept messages, friend request, emails, pictures, or files from people you do not know.



Reliable

Not all information online is reliable



Tell

Tell an adult you trust if something or someone makes you worried or uncomfortable



Icons and Graphics Safety Plan

A safety plan made with icons can be left by the computer or area where devices are used as reminders about keeping user identity and location private. Here is an example.



INTERNET SAFETY PLAN

1. Never use your real name for user names



JohnSmith@gmail.com



Cooldude@gmail.com

2. Only share your passwords with family/caregivers; no one else.



Hey everyone my password is.



Hey Mom my password is.

3. Never share your home address/city or phone number.

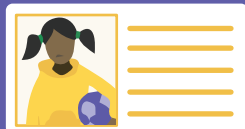


I live at 555 Real St
Winnipeg



I live in Manitoba

4. Never post information that reveals your true identity.



5. Never post pictures that reveal your true identity



6. Never agree to meet strangers or people you only know online.



We should hang-out some time



I don't think we should meet up

Play It Safe Acronym

Personal information - never share personal information online

Let a friend or family member know - if someone has asked you for this information, or if you don't feel safe

Attachments - remember that email attachments can have malware that can damage your computer and harvest your information. Don't open them unless it's a file that you are expecting from someone you trust.

Your feelings are important - if something makes you uncomfortable or unsafe, stop and let somebody know.

Information - remember that not everything you read is true.

Take breaks - from your computer often to socialize, stretch, and give your eyes a rest.

Spend money safely - don't buy things from unfamiliar stores or links, and don't send people money.

Act polite - don't say things online that you wouldn't say in real life.

Friends online should stay online - if someone asks to meet up, tell them no.

Enjoy yourself and have fun!

Online Safety Social Story

Social Stories, first introduced by Carol Gray, are individualized short stories that depict a social situation that an autistic person may encounter. These social stories are used to teach communal skills through the use of precise and sequential information about everyday events that a person may otherwise find difficult or confusing, thus preventing further anxiety for the autistic person.

Social Stories have 4 sentences - descriptive, directive, perspective, and affirmative sentences. They can exist in other formats, like storytelling, singing, computer-based presentations, and even videos. They tend to have a few more additional components, but always contain the four descriptive, directive, perspective, and affirmative sentences.

[Online Safety Social Story – PAAutism.org, an ASERT Autism Resource Guide](#) (has an all at once or one slide at a time presentation option)

[Animated Internet Safety Social Story – YouTube](#)

Using the Incredible 5 Point Scale for Internet Well-Being

The Incredible 5 Point Scale, created by Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis, is a scale that promotes self-management of behavior and emotional regulation. It allows abstract concepts and feelings to be personalized and they are presented visually, concretely, and remain unchanged. When a behavior is identified, it is task analyzed or broken down into concrete parts. Each part is assigned a number and/or color. Then, in collaboration with the autistic individual, these parts are assigned a label.

The narrative about each level would be read with the person, and the coping ideas in the last column would be taught. The scale can be used to help the person remember how to respond to each level of feelings. A picture of a related interest (Disney character, train, superhero, Anime character) can also be incorporated at each level to add motivation for using the scale.

If a person can't read, pictures can be used in the place of text.

Example of a scale for cyberbullying - [5-Point-Scale-Cyberbullying.pdf \(ocali.org\)](#)

Example of a scale for anxiety - [5-Point-Scale-Anxiety.pdf \(ocali.org\)](#)

Blank scale - [5-Point-Scale-Blank-with-Visuals.pdf \(ocali.org\)](#)

The Power Card Strategy

The Power Card Strategy involves using interests with visual aids to teach skills to autistic individuals. They are most effectively used with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities.

A power card is paired with a social narrative. Social narratives and power cards are a form of skill or behavior modeling: use a power card to show what a person **SHOULD** do, and not what they **SHOULD NOT** do.

The person will need frequent real life situations, including role playing, to practice the Power Card Strategy.

How to Create A Power Card

1. Choose a behavior or skill to teach through use of a power card.
2. Use a person's interest to choose characters or items to include in a social narrative and on a power card. (ex. Disney characters, superheroes, TV personalities, anime characters)
3. Write and illustrate a brief social narrative to model how a character would use the behavior or skill in a situation similar to when it is needed in the person's daily life.
4. Create the power card. Make a card that shows a picture or illustration of the person's interest and a few simple statements that recall the social narrative. The power card acts as a "reminder" about how or when to use the skill shown in the social narrative.
5. Review the power card with the person just before the skill or behavior may be needed.
6. Give the person feedback about how well they used the skill or behavior.

Example – Online Safety Power Card Using Sonic the Hedgehog

Sonic the Hedgehog Plays It Safe Online

Sonic loves being on the internet and talking with friends online. He knows that some information about him must be kept private and not shared online. This is to keep him safe from people who do not know him very well like his family does. Sonic can still have fun online without having to share his real name, address and phone number.

When using the internet, Sonic wants you to stay safe and follow these 3 rules:

1. Keep your personal information private like name, address and phone number.
2. Use a screen name that is not your real name.
3. Tell a trusted adult if someone has asked you for this information, or if you don't feel safe.

Sonic is proud of you for keeping yourself safe on the internet!

[Power-Card-Blank-Template.pdf \(ocali.org\)](https://www.ocali.org/Power-Card-Blank-Template.pdf)

Taking a Break

It is really important to take breaks from being online. Long online sessions can also allow for more chances of exposure to inappropriate content. High technology use may lead to increased isolation, depression, anxiety, sleep problems if tech devices are used too close to bedtime, and reduced physical activity. Taking regular breaks can help with internet addiction.

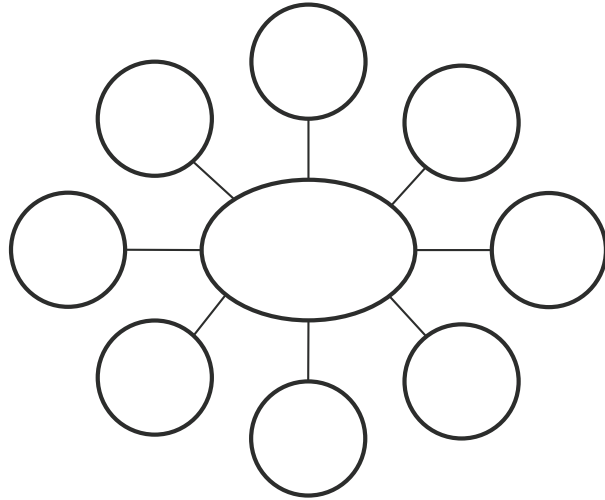
Using the Computer Log Time Chart, Computer Hours Per Week Chart and/or the Social Networking Activity Chart mentioned in the Charts section can raise awareness about the frequency of computer use and how long online sessions are. Once that information is known, you can then work in breaks.

There is also an app called [Offtime](#) App that can be used to monitor phone use and create disconnect time.

Breaks can be put on to a visual schedule with some options for break activities.

<https://veryspecialtales.com/break-cards/>

Ideas for what to do on breaks should be developed with the autistic person. Using a graphic organizer might be helpful to provide structured ideas for breaks. You may decide to build the break activities around the person's interests.



An example of using this graphic organizer could look like this:

Music as the interest in the center circle. Around that word are the supporting activities – dancing to music, jumping on a mini-trampoline to a favorite song, yoga moves to music, listening to music, coloring to music.

You could use this a different way and put Break in the center circle and then come up with ideas for the breaks like scrap-booking, some sort of movement, a walk around the block etc. You can use pictures as well as words.

Breaks will need to have structure and the ideas for break options should be determined in advance. To say, “You need a break” could be overwhelming if the person doesn’t know what to do.

If breaks are worked into the schedule or timed by the clock or with a Time Timer, this can also allow for autonomy and remove the need for a support person to be present to start the break. Young children may need more guidance to start this and make break time a habit.

Conclusion

There are many tools available to make the internet a safe place to be. Parents, caregivers and support persons need to be aware of the possible dangers of internet use and provide structure and guidance around being online. Having rules and boundaries demonstrated through visuals and understandable tools provide meaningful references to keep an autistic person safe and reduce their risks. Personalizing these various tools will make them relevant and support independence while using the internet.

There are lots of wonderful aspects to being online, but at the same time it requires vigilance and a balance of time spent there.

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