

# Keep an eye on teens and online relationships

By NATALIE KOLLROSS, Psy.D.

A large number of adults use online dating websites now. People also connect and reconnect via Facebook and other social media platforms. While teens may not be able to utilize a dating website, they are increasingly turning to the Internet to find or foster romantic relationships.

While a lot of teens still prefer to date someone with whom they can have physical contact, some teens have found exclusively online relationships. They often use the Internet to connect with others and find like-minded individuals. They want to connect with those who they believe best understand them. Oftentimes, teens may feel excluded or isolated at their school or in their community, so they turn to the Internet for solace and connection. However, this obviously creates fear in the minds of their parents who understand the real dangers of online predators.

Teens may not always have the best decision-making skills or forethought and can leave themselves vulnerable. On the other hand, they crave social connection and are trying to form their own identities. If a teen is seeking an online relationship, likely they are trying to find a same-aged peer who shares their interests. They connect with the person via different social media platforms, text and video chat. It is not unlike what used to be referred to as a "long distance relationship."

It can definitely be scary if your teen has formed an online relation-

ship, but the best thing you can do as a parent is stay open-minded and open up lines of communication. Teens shut down if confronted and chastised, so if you go to your teen with genuine interest in this new person in their life, they are more likely to open up about them.

This allows you to gather more information about the person and the relationship to better assess if there is potential for danger. If you can, "meet"

the person via the Internet, such as on video chat. This would be a great way to ascertain if they are who they say they are. Most teens feel capable and comfortable in the world of FaceTime, Skype, etc. A big red flag would be if a person is not willing to video chat or even speak over the phone.

It is also important to talk to your teen about the dangers of online predators and how to stay safe. They need to know what to look out for in online relationships and how to know if someone is not being truthful or has bad intentions. Most likely your teens' relationship will come to an end as most teen relationships do. Remember that if you keep the lines of communication open and stay interested, you will stay better informed about what your teen is doing and help them to stay safe.

*Dr. Kollross is a psychologist at Psychological Services of Pendleton and mother of two.*



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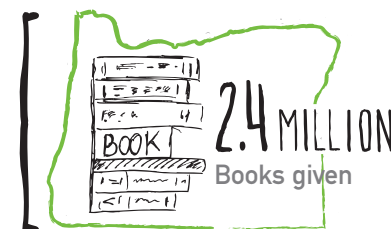
125,061

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