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Working with At-Risk Children and Teens



Teenagers, Digital Sexual Behavior, and the TEAMS Approach

by Alex Rodrigues, Psy.D.

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The digital world is advancing upon the physical world at an increasing rate. As a result, more and more aspects of daily life are becoming digitized. Adolescents, much like everyone else, are spending more time online, and this includes those at risk due to other circumstances in their lives. Among many things, teenagers use the Internet to complete schoolwork, connect with peers, and create and share digital content. Additionally, teenagers use technology to navigate developmental tasks involving identity, friendships, and sexual relationships. For instance, social media allows adolescents to form peer groups with like-minded people and online educational resources help inform adolescents about safe sex and sexual practices. It is difficult for many adults to think

of teenagers as sexual beings with sexual motivations, but it is simply a fact of life. Consequently, adults need to talk to teenagers about adolescence and digital sexual behavior (DSB).

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Although many parents want to help their children traverse the digital landscape safely, they don't know where to start. The familiar birds and bees discussion was already difficult long before the digital divide. However, adults need to understand how to address DSBs like pornography use, sexting, and online sexual content. To help, I summarize and outline the **TEAMS** approach, a plan for addressing teenagers and their exposure to digital sexual behavior.

Triage: The "T" in the TEAMS strategy stands for triage, and underlines the importance of prioritizing and managing risky situations. A good starting point is simply asking the youth whether he or she has ever felt uncomfortable online. How a parent or helping provider asks will depend on the young person, but this question is specifically phrased to capture digital's expanding role in our lives, and determine whether it is placing the young person at risk for harm in some way. Parents, caregivers, and professionals should be mindful that some issues will require calling the authorities. Such cases are likely to present an immediate threat to a teen's physical or emotional wellbeing. For instance, the police or child protective services may need to be notified in matters of online child sexexploitation or the blackmail of children using sexual content. In these cases, the child or adolescent creates digital sexual content, which the perpetrator then uses to obtain the youth's compliance. The perpetrator threatens to disclose the material if the youth resists. Other high-risk situations include doxing (the involuntary disclosure of personal information), revenge pornography (the public release of private sexual content-like pictures by a former partner), and catfishing (tricking someone into a relationship with a fake online persona). When a youth's safety is not under immediate threat, a slower, nuanced approach, like the kind detailed below, is likely adequate.

Education: The "E" stands for education and signals the importance that decisions be based on trusted, credible information. As mentioned, adults have a lot to contend with when dealing with teenagers and digital sexual content, which is complicated by technology's never-ending changes. The latest technological advances and crazes have short shelf lives and can lead us to feeling dizzy and intimidated by the process. Fortunately, there are great resources already available. For instance, [Commonsense Media](#) offers plenty of free, readable material about kid-safe tech use. The website regularly provides updates about the latest

apps, videogames, and movies as well as the associated benefits and consequences to kids. Additionally, [Children and Screens](#) is another online resource that offers a more academic, but still highly accessible, knowledge base. Lastly, for those addicted to podcasts, [Tech Stuff](#) is a great show that covers various tech-related issues weekly. Education means becoming familiar with the digital world our young people are living within, and basing decisions on trusted information sources.

Assessment: With the child's safety guaranteed, it is time for a more nuanced assessment of the issue. Broadly speaking, we need to determine the extent DSB is impacting the youth's life. When determining whether a behavior is healthy or unhealthy, consider whether the child's social, academic, and family responsibilities are being negatively impacted. For instance, is the DSB affecting school performance, and are teachers calling home? Another question to ask is whether the youth's perception of sex and relationships is age-appropriate and accurate, or does she or he have distorted views? For example, does the teenager's view of sex reflect the unrealistic expectations pushed by commercial pornography?

Additionally, ask what the youth gains from the DSB, as not all DSBs are bad. For instance, research suggests that many kids use the Internet to get reliable information about safe sex, pregnancy, and sexual minority issues. Our decisions about which direction DSBs lean will be shaped by a sense of those that are potentially harmful in their message or action. For instance, a parent or helping provider might recognize a DSB as potentially harmful if there is a legal risk associated with the behavior, such as sharing sexual images related to "sexting." Adolescents can find themselves in trouble if they share a naked image of a partner with others; however, many teens don't understand that such action represents a violation of sexual consent, as that image was likely intended only for the recipient's eyes. Another possible starting point is to assess how much time the teenager is spending online. This question can be quickly answered by checking an application's [internal use log](#). Once the assessment is underway, adults will be better positioned to help and make informed decisions.



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Monitor: It is important to say that these types of conversations are not a one-time exercise. Parents and professionals need to keep the conversation open and allow it to evolve alongside the youth's development. Monitoring, in this sense, is not limited to



interventions like Net Nanny, parental controls, or reviewing search histories. While such controls can be helpful, they aren't a silver bullet or unbeatable. Adults need to check in regularly with youths and continue the conversation. For instance, one can ask about what new apps a teenager and her friends are using; whether she had any recent, uncomfortable online experiences; or how she manages her online persona or digital content.

Skill-building: Another part of the **TEAMS** plan is skill-building. Teenagers, much like adults, are susceptible to falling for online misinformation. Role-playing and thinking through imaginary situations can prepare teenagers for the online world. For instance, teaching kids to be online detectives and look for consistency across peoples' social media accounts is a great first step. Many fake online personas quickly fall apart when scrutinized. Respectful skepticism is an invaluable resource for youth in both the digital and physical worlds. Teenagers should also be encouraged to be suspicious of odd-looking

web pages and URLs (web addresses). Most modern, professional web pages are easy to use, not littered with strange advertisements, and don't scroll on forever. Lastly, youths with heavy technology use that is having a negative impact on their lives should be encouraged to try a digital detox and purposely not use their devices. A digital detox does not need to be absolute or global but can simply involve specified times, such as dinner or before bed, when the youth or the family agrees to abstain from tech use. For added effect, adults should offer an alternative activity, as anecdotal evidence suggests that digital withdrawal is real. For example, some teens report increased anxiety and restlessness when they are without their phone and face possible FOMO (fear of missing out). Such teens worry that they are being excluded from fun activities that their friends and peers are engaging in.

The digital landscape is evolving at light speed, and those hesitant or unwilling to talk about digital sexual behavior are leaving their own children, or those children they work with, unprepared and, possibly, unsafe. Talking about such issues is difficult, but the **TEAMS** approach provides a helpful framework to address adolescence, sexuality, and technology. Adults using this approach will likely find that talking to adolescents about these issues is not as difficult as they expected. Additionally, adolescents encouraged to think about these things will be well on their way to becoming responsible digital citizens.



Dr. Alex Rodrigues is a licensed psychologist who regularly consults in high-stakes evaluations. He has testified in a range of criminal matters and also provides clinical consultation for private sector businesses and government organizations on employment, mental health, and violence-related issues. Dr. Rodrigues enjoys working with late adolescents and young adults who have become stagnant and need assistance in career and life development. He is very excited about his most recent endeavor, Digital Birds & Bees, which is a sexual education curriculum for the digital age.