

KNOW2PROTECT®

BUILD T.R.U.S.T.

*How2Be a Trusted Adult
to Kids and Teens*



Kids and teens often face difficult situations online, including **grooming**, **sextortion**, **bullying** and **abuse**. For many young people, the difference between staying silent and seeking help comes down to whether they have a **trusted adult in their life**. Kids and teens want to be heard, believed and taken seriously. It's not enough for someone to just say they're a trusted adult — they need to show kids and teens through their actions.

WHAT IS A TRUSTED ADULT AND WHY DOES THIS ROLE MATTER?

A trusted adult is someone kids and teens feel safe turning to — with difficult or sensitive concerns — without fear of blame, judgment, embarrassment or punishment. Trusted adults listen calmly, take concerns seriously and help connect them with the support or protection they need.

Trusted adults provide an important benefit to the well-being of children. If you work with youth — for example, as a coach, teacher, religious leader, mentor or youth leader — **you may**

be the person a child turns to first when something goes wrong. Being a trusted adult is a commitment to children's safety, but it's also an important role and responsibility that requires specific skills.

Today's youth navigate a digital landscape where exploitation can hide in apps, games and social media. Increasingly, teens are turning to artificial intelligence (AI) companions for emotional support. According to Common Sense Media, 72% of teens have tried artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, and 33 percent have used them to discuss important or serious matters rather than talking to real people.²

For teens, talking to AI can feel safer than risking the judgment of a person. These bots are always available and appear empathetic, which quickly builds trust. However, while AI is convenient, it can never replace the genuine care, guidance and protection provided by a trusted adult.³

This is why it is vital to learn these skills so you can help the kids and teens in your life when they need you most.

*When children can identify a **trusted adult**, they are more likely to **seek help** and engage in positive, healthy behaviors.*

According to a Journal of Medical Internet Research study.¹

¹ *Seeking Help From Trusted Adults in Response to Peers' Social Media Posts About Mental Health Struggles: Qualitative Interview Study Among Latinx Adolescents* | National Institutes of Health

² *Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs: How and Why Teens Use AI Companions* | Common Sense Media

³ *Michigan Experts Warn: Your Child's New Friend May Be an AI Companion* | Bridge Michigan Digital Publication



STEPS2TAKE TO BECOME A TRUSTED ADULT IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The **T.R.U.S.T.** acronym is a simple way to help trusted adults remember the tools necessary to most effectively support the kids and teens in their lives.⁴



T

Talk early, talk often. Begin a conversation with the kids and teens in your life now, so that they will feel comfortable coming to you later. Promote open, ongoing dialogue and encourage questions to establish yourself as a reliable resource for their online safety. Our [Take Action](#) page is a good place to start.



R

React calmly and empathically. Recognize the courage it takes to come forward. Stay calm, manage your own emotions and show genuine interest. Reinforce that they are not alone, and that you are there to help them through this. Always place responsibility on the predator, not on the child, and remember to avoid victim-blaming language.



U

Understand the evolving threats youth may face online. Stay informed about online exploitation risks, like grooming and sextortion. Become familiar with support services, evidence preservation practices, reporting options and the full reporting process. Check out our [Know the Threats](#) and [How2Report](#) pages for more information.



S

Set clear boundaries together. Model a healthy balance between screen time and face-to-face interactions. Discuss online safety practices, making sure that they understand how and why to implement online safety measures. Use the [Internet Safety Checklist](#) and the [Family Online Safety Agreement](#) to get started.



T

Teach them you're always their safe place. Make yourself approachable and present. Give them your undivided attention, showing you're truly there for them as a trusted anchor in their digital world. When they seek your support, use affirming and empathetic statements. Language such as, “I hear you” and “thank you for sharing this with me” can make all the difference for a child or teen coming forward. Explore our [Survivor Support](#) page to learn how you can assist survivors.

What stops kids from speaking up?

Research shows many avoid seeking adult help for online harms due to fears of judgment, emotional reactions and escalation.⁵

⁴ *Be a Trusted Adult For Young People in Your Life* | National Alliance on Mental Illness

⁵ *Desperately Seeking Non-Judgmental Supports: Young People's Perceptions of Adult Responses to Technology* | Dalhousie University