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ADVANCEMENT
CASEN LLC

5 Ways Social-Emotional Skills Prepare Your *Neurodivergent Child* for the Digital World



The Group Chat That Changed Everything

This is a fictional family story created for educational purposes. It illustrates situations children may encounter online and the importance of supportive family communication.

Twelve-year-old Caleb was excited. For the first time, a group of classmates had invited him to join their online group chat.

Caleb was autistic, bright, creative, and loved playing video games. Making friends, however, wasn't always easy. Sometimes he struggled to understand sarcasm, recognize when someone was joking, or know how to respond when conversations became uncomfortable.

"Mom! They invited me into their group chat! I finally have friends to talk to after school!"

His mother, Angela, smiled. She knew how much being included meant to him.

For the first few days, everything seemed wonderful. The children shared jokes, funny videos, and talked about their favorite games.

Then something changed.

One afternoon, a boy in the group posted an embarrassing picture of another student. Everyone started responding with laughing emojis. Caleb didn't think it was funny, but he didn't want to be the only one who didn't laugh.

Then someone wrote, "Caleb, why are you being so quiet? Can't you take a joke?"

Caleb felt uncomfortable. He wanted to say something, but he was afraid the group would stop including him.

A few days later, another message appeared.

"Everybody share your gaming password so we can help each other level up. Don't tell your parents. They'll just make a big deal out of it."

Caleb stared at his phone. He knew he wasn't supposed to share his password. His mother had told him that many times.

But these were his friends. What if saying no meant losing them?

Pause here: What would your child do?

Before you read on, picture your own child holding that phone.

Caleb's stomach tightened. He felt confused, worried, and pressured. He wanted to belong, but something didn't feel right.

That evening, Angela noticed that Caleb wasn't acting like himself.

"Caleb, is everything okay?"

"I'm fine," he answered. But he wasn't.

After a few minutes, he quietly asked, "Mom, can somebody be your friend and still make you do things you don't want to do?"

Angela put down what she was doing and sat beside him.

"That's an important question. Tell me what's happening."

As Caleb showed her the messages, Angela realized that her son was facing challenges that couldn't be solved by simply knowing how to use technology.

He needed to understand what healthy friendships looked like. He needed to recognize when something felt unsafe. He needed the confidence to say no, even when he was afraid of being rejected. He needed to pause before reacting. And most importantly, he needed to know that he could ask for help without being judged or punished for telling the truth.

Angela looked at her son and said, "Caleb, I'm glad you told me. You never have to handle something like this alone. We will figure it out together."

For the first time that evening, Caleb relaxed. He hadn't shared his password. He hadn't responded to the pressure.

That night, Angela realized something important. She had taught Caleb not to share personal information online. She had warned him about strangers and reminded him to be careful about what he posted.

But she hadn't fully considered what would happen when the pressure came from children he considered friends.

Digital Readiness Is More Than Knowing the Rules

YOU CAN TEACH **Don't share your password.**	But whathappenswhentheirbest friend asks for it?
YOU CAN TEACH **Don't talk to strangers online.**	But what happens when someone they've been gaming with for months feels like a friend?
YOU CAN TEACH **Don't participate in cyberbullying.**	But what happens when the entire group chat is laughing?
YOU CAN TEACH **Tell an adult when something happens.**	But what happens when your child is afraid you'll take their device away?

Knowing the rules and knowing how to apply them when emotions, friendships, and peer pressure are involved are two very different things.

And that is where social-emotional learning becomes so important.

Caleb's story could have happened in a group chat, an online game, a messaging app, or another digital community. The platform isn't the most important part of the story. The skills Caleb needed are. And those skills can be taught, practiced, and strengthened.

For neurodivergent children, these skills may require explicit instruction, individualized support, and opportunities to practice in a safe, structured environment. That is why preparing children for social media should begin before they are expected to navigate these situations independently.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The next five pages each cover one way social-emotional skills prepare your child. The first four follow the points of the CASEN Compass™: Connection, Safety, Advocacy, and Navigation. The fifth is what makes the other four work.

Each page ends with a question to ask your child and space to write down what they say.

1 They help your child build healthier relationships

CASEN COMPASS™: CONNECTION

Build healthy relationships.

Social media doesn't create a completely separate social world. Many of the relationship skills children need offline are the same skills they will need online. These skills become especially important online, where messages can be misunderstood and social interactions can happen quickly.

Neurodivergent children sometimes take things literally. Without a tone of voice or a facial expression, a joke, a sarcastic comment, or someone who is only kind when they want something can be hard to read. They need guidance in recognizing and building healthy friendships.

Children need opportunities to learn how to:

- recognize the characteristics of healthy friendships;
- respect other people's boundaries;
- recognize unhealthy relationship behaviors; and
- understand when a relationship may require help from a trusted adult.

That learning includes communicating respectfully, showing empathy, and handling disagreements.

IN CALEB'S STORY

Caleb asked the right question: "Can somebody be your friend and still make you do things you don't want to do?" Children need help finding the answer.

ASK YOUR CHILD

"How can you tell when someone online is being a real friend?"

What they said

2 They help your child recognize when something doesn't feel right

CASEN COMPASS™: SAFETY

Protect yourself and others.

Digital safety involves more than knowing what information should remain private. Neurodivergent children may encounter uncomfortable messages, unwanted contact, pressure from peers, requests for personal information, inappropriate content, bullying, manipulation, or someone asking them to keep an online interaction secret.

Rules can tell a child what they should do. Social-emotional skills help them recognize what they are feeling and respond when a situation doesn't match the rules they learned.

Children need practice identifying emotions such as discomfort, fear, confusion, embarrassment, pressure, and uncertainty. A child who recognizes those feelings is better positioned to pause and seek help rather than continuing an interaction simply because they don't know what else to do.

Safety teaches children to notice those feelings and not to ignore them.

IN CALEB'S STORY

Caleb's stomach tightened before he could explain why. That feeling was his signal that something wasn't right.

ASK YOUR CHILD

Caleb's stomach tightened before he could explain why. That feeling was his signal that something wasn't right.

What they said

_____

_____

_____

REMIND THEM

You don't have to be certain that something is wrong before asking for help.

_____

3 They help your child handle peer pressure

CASEN COMPASS™: ADVOCACY

Use your voice to help yourself and others.

Peer pressure doesn't disappear when children go online. In fact, digital environments can introduce new ways for children to feel pressure to belong.
A child might be encouraged to:

- participate in a mean group chat;
- join in when someone is being mocked;
- send something they don't want to send;
- keep an uncomfortable interaction secret; or
- post something because "everyone else is doing it."

For neurodivergent children who strongly want to fit in, knowing the safest choice and making the safest choice are not the same thing. Children need opportunities to practice setting boundaries, tolerating disappointment, handling rejection, and making decisions that may be different from those of their peers.

Belonging should not require you to give up your safety, values, or boundaries.

Advocacy helps children use their voice with courage and confidence to speak up for themselves and others.

IN CALEB'S STORY

"Can't you take a joke?" and "Don't tell your parents" were both pressure. Caleb needed words ready before those messages arrived.

ASK YOUR CHILD

"What could you say if your friends pressured you to do something online that you knew wasn't a good idea?"

What they said

_____

_____

Practice possible responses together before your child needs them.

_____

4 They help your child pause before reacting

CASEN COMPASS™: NAVIGATION

Make wise choices.

The digital world moves quickly. A neurodivergent child can feel angry, embarrassed, rejected, or excited and respond within seconds.

Send. Post. Comment. Share. Forward.

Once something is sent, however, the child may lose control over where it goes or who sees it. For a child who tends to act on impulse or who feels rejection deeply, that speed is even harder to manage.

Self-awareness and self-management can help children recognize strong emotions and create space between feeling and responding. Teach your child to practice a simple Digital Pause:

THE DIGITAL PAUSE

STOP	What am I feeling right now?
THINK	What could happen if I send, post, or share this?
CHOOSE	What is the safest and most respectful choice?

Sometimes the wisest digital decision is to put the device down and return to the situation after emotions have settled. Navigation helps children learn to make wise choices about everything they post online.

IN CALEB'S STORY

Caleb didn't share his password, and he didn't answer the pressure. He paused, and that pause gave him time to talk with his mother.

ASK YOUR CHILD

"What kinds of feelings might make it harder to make a good decision online?"

What they said

_____

_____

5 They help your child ask for help

THE SKILL THAT MAKES THE OTHER FOUR WORK

One of the most important digital-readiness skills isn't knowing how to handle every situation independently. It's knowing when not to handle something alone.

Neurodivergent children sometimes hesitate to tell adults about online problems because they worry that:

- they will lose their phone or gaming privileges;
- they will get in trouble;
- their friends will call them a snitch;
- the adult won't understand; or
- they should have known better.

That's why parents need to build an environment where children know they can come to them, even when the child has made a mistake.

INSTEAD OF BEGINNING WITH	CONSIDER BEGINNING WITH
"Why did you do that?"	**"I'm glad you told me. Let's figure out what we need to do next."**

A child who knows how to ask for help and believes that trusted adults will listen has an important layer of support when navigating difficult situations. Connection, Safety, Advocacy, and Navigation all depend on that trust.

IN CALEB'S STORY

Caleb's first answer was "I'm fine." He opened up after Angela sat beside him and listened

ASK YOUR CHILD

Who are the adults you could tell if something happened online?"

What they said

_____

_____

KEEP THIS PAGE

FOR THE FRIDGE

Print this page and put it where your family will see it.

The Digital Pause

STOP	What am I feeling right now?
THINK	What could happen if I send, post, or share this?
CHOOSE	What is the safest and most respectful choice?

Five Questions to Ask Your Child

1. How can you tell when someone online is being a real friend?
2. If something online made you uncomfortable but you weren't sure whether it was dangerous, what could you do?
3. What could you say if your friends pressured you to do something online that you knew wasn't a good idea?
4. What kinds of feelings might make it harder to make a good decision online?
5. Who are the adults you could tell if something happened online?

Trusted Adults I Can Go To

_____

_____

_____

_____

ONE FRAMEWORK FOR EVERY SITUATION

Start With the CASEN Compass™

When your child encounters a difficult social or digital situation, encourage them to ask:

CONNECTION
Build healthy relationships.
Is this a healthy interaction or relationship?

SAFETY
Protect yourself and others.
Is this safe for me and others?

ADVOCACY
Use your voice to help yourself and others.
Do I need to speak up, set a boundary, or ask for help?

NAVIGATION
Make wise choices.
What is the wisest choice I can make next?

The goal isn't to prepare children for every situation they could ever encounter.
The goal is to help them develop skills they can carry into situations you couldn't predict.



OUR NEXT STEP

How Ready Is Your Child?

You don' thave to guess.

The **CASEN Social Media Readiness Assessment** helps parents and caregivers take a closer look at their child's current strengths and areas for growth across **Connection, Safety, Advocacy, and Navigation.** It takes approximately 5 minutes.

Take the FREE CASEN Social Media Readiness Assessment

www.mothersofexceptionalkids.com

Scan the QR code with your phone camera, or type the address into your browser.

About the Author

Dr. Myava Clark is the Co-Founder and President of CASEN LLC, an educator, advocate, speaker, and best-selling author. She co-founded CASEN with her son, Chris Clark Jr.

About CASEN

CASEN (Collaborative Advancement for Social-Emotional Needs) prepares neurodivergent children to navigate social and digital environments with greater confidence through social-emotional learning, social media readiness education, and guided practice.

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