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Before Something Happens

Essential Tools to Protect Neurodivergent Children in the Digital Age



Every tool includes tips for neurodivergent children, who often need safety rules taught directly and practiced, not just explained.

8 PRACTICAL TOOLS

- Privacy Settings
- Gaming Safety
- Online Boundaries
- What to Say Now

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Before Something Happens: Essential Tools to Protect Neurodivergent Children in the Digital Age

Your child doesn't have to be on social media to be part of the digital world. Children connect through games, gaming chats, group texts, video platforms, school technology, and every connected device in your home.

Technology gives children ways to learn, create, play, and build relationships. It can also put them in situations they do not yet have the social-emotional skills to handle alone.

Digital safety isn't about frightening children away from technology. **It's about preparing them to use it.** Here are eight tools to set up before something happens.

Which Guide Do You Need?

CASEN has five guides on staying safe with peers and online. Each one does a different job.

If you are asking	Open
How do I set my child up safely before anything goes wrong?	This guide
How do I help my child speak up and tell me when something is wrong?	*Speak Up, I've Got You: The CASEN Family Speak-Up Plan*
Do we need a monitoring app, and which one fits our child?	*The CASEN Apps and Tools Guide*
What is bullying? Is this bullying or ordinary conflict?	*Is This Bullying? The CASEN Guide to Bullying, Cyberbullying & Online Safety*
Something happened. What do I do now?	*Is This Bullying? The CASEN Guide to Bullying, Cyberbullying & Online Safety*

Prepare with this one. Build your child's speak-up plan with the second. Choose your tools with the third. Recognize with the fourth. Respond with the fifth.

Why This Looks Different for Neurodivergent Children

Most digital safety advice assumes a child will read social cues, bend a rule to fit a new situation, and carry it from one app to the next. Many neurodivergent children need those things taught directly. That is not a fault. It is a reason to be more specific.

What to plan for	Why it matters online	What helps
Rules are taken literally	"Don't talk to strangers" stops working when someone your child has gamed with for a month no longer feels like a stranger.	Make the rule concrete: "Someone you have only met online is an online-only friend, no matter how long you have played together."
A strong wish to belong	Gifts, game currency, and attention can feel like friendship. Saying no can feel like losing the friend	*Teach one test: A real friend does not ask for passwords, photos, or secrets.*
Acting before thinking	Posting, buying, clicking, and replying can all happen before your child has had time to think	*Turn on purchase approvals. Teach one short rule: "Pause, then ask."*
Skills do not carry over	Your child may block someone easily in one game and have no idea how in another.	*Practice in every app and game, and again each time a new one is added.*
Change is hard	A limit that changes without warning can feel like a punishment, and can lead to a meltdown or to hiding things.	*Explain before you change a setting. Give notice. Write the rules down where your child can see them.*
Screens help them regulate	*A game may be how your child calms down, and where their friends are*	*Avoid taking the device as your first response. Adjust settings together.*

Not every row will fit your child. Use the ones that do.

Start Here: Five Settings to Check Tonight

If you only have a few minutes, start with the device your child uses most and check these five things. The tools that follow explain each one.

Check	Where to look	A safe starting point
Who can message my child	Each game, app, and console	Friends only, or off
Voice chat	Each game and console	Off, or friends only
Location sharing	Phone settings and each app	Off, unless your family needs it
Purchases	The app store and the console account	Ask a parent first
Sign-in security	Your child's main accounts	A strong password and two-step sign-in

Sit with your child while you do it, and say why you are making each change.

Tool 1: Open Communication

Your most important safety tool isn't an app. No parental control can anticipate every message, friendship, or decision your child will meet. Communication is the foundation of your family's plan.

"What did you do online today?" usually gets "nothing." Try questions that are specific and easy to answer:

- "Did anything online make you laugh today?"
- "Did anything make you uncomfortable?"
- "Who did you talk to while you were gaming?"
- "Did anyone say something that confused you?"
- "Did you see anyone being treated badly?"

Many neurodivergent children talk more easily side by side than face to face. Ask while they play, or say, "Show me how this game works." You will learn more from watching ten minutes than from asking ten questions.

Most importantly, tell your child: "**If something happens online, even if you made a mistake, you can come to me.**" Children need to know that asking for help will not automatically cost them their technology.

Tool 2: Parental Controls

Parental controls add a layer of protection while your child builds independence. Depending on the device or service, they can let you:

- Limit inappropriate content.
- Manage screen time.
- Restrict downloads and purchases.
- Manage who can communicate with your child.
- Review certain activity.
- Manage apps.
- Restrict certain websites.
- Turn on safe search in browsers and search engines.
- Filter websites for the whole home through your internet router or provider.

Start with the tools you already have. Before you buy software, look at the controls built into your child's phone, tablet, computer, gaming console, browser, app store, and individual games and apps.

Explain before you restrict. Tell your child what a control does and why it is there, and give notice before you change it. To a child who depends on routine, an invisible restriction looks like broken technology or a punishment.

Parental controls are tools. They do not replace communication, teaching, or supervision. The goal is for your child to make safer choices without them.
Thinking about a paid monitoring app? *The CASEN Apps and Tools Guide* helps you decide whether you need one, which kind fits your child, and how to use it openly

Tool 3: Privacy and Location Settings

Private doesn't mean invisible. Review the settings with your child. Do not assume the defaults give your family the privacy you want.

- [ ] Who can view the profile?
- [ ] Who can send direct messages?
- [ ] Who can add your child to groups?
- [ ] What information is shown publicly?
- [ ] Who can send friend or follow requests?
- [ ] Who can comment on posts or tag your child?
- [ ] Is the account searchable?

Privacy settings reduce exposure. They cannot guarantee privacy. Anyone who can see something can screenshot, save, or share it.

A photo can reveal more than your child realizes. Check these location settings too:

- [ ] Location permissions on each app.
- [ ] Location tags on photos and the camera.
- [ ] Maps and family-sharing settings.
- [ ] Location sharing with friends.
- [ ] Check-in features

Teach your child to look past themselves in a photo and ask, "**What else can someone see?**" A school logo, street sign, house number, sports uniform, or license plate can tell a stranger where to find them. Try it as a detective game with old photos. Many children who notice small details are very good at it.

Tool 4: Account Security

Children need cybersecurity skills too. Teach your child to:

- [ ] Use a strong, different password or passphrase for each account.
- [ ] Keep passwords private, including from friends.
- [ ] Turn on two-step sign-in where it is available.
- [ ] Lock devices with a PIN or password.
- [ ] Keep apps and devices updated.
- [ ] Avoid suspicious links, attachments, and downloads.
- [ ] Download apps and files only from trusted sources.
- [ ] Use a strong password on your home Wi-Fi.

Family rule: a password is private, even when someone says, "If we're really friends, you'll give it to me." Friendship never requires giving up your security.

This rule matters most for a child who badly wants to keep a friend. Practice the answer out loud: "I don't share passwords. My family has a rule." Blaming the rule gives your child a way to say no without feeling they are rejecting the friend.

Tool 5: Gaming Safety

Gaming is social. For many children it includes voice chat, text chat, direct messages, friend requests, private groups, and people they have never met offline. Learn the social features of each game your child plays.

- [ ] Can strangers communicate with my child?
- [ ] Is voice chat turned on?
- [ ] Can someone message my child privately?
- [ ] Can players send links?
- [ ] Can a conversation be moved to another app?
- [ ] Does the game allow purchases or gifts?
- [ ] Does my child know how to block a player?
- [ ] Does my child know how to report a player?

For many neurodivergent children, gaming is where friendship comes easiest. Respect that. The aim is to keep those friendships safe, not to treat every online friend as a threat.

Teach your child that someone who plays with them often will start to feel familiar, and **familiar is not the same as known.** An online-only friend does not get three things:

1. Your full name, address, or school.
2. Photos of you.
3. A private chat on a different app.

Add one more rule. If an online-only friend offers a gift, game currency, or a favor, tell a parent before you accept it.

Tool 6: Digital Boundaries

Boundaries should cover more than how long your child can be online. Decide these five together.

Boundary	The question to answer
What	Which apps, games, websites, and platforms can my child use?
Who	Who can my child communicate with?
Where	Where in the house can devices be used?
When	When do devices get put away?
How	What behavior does our family expect online?

Then agree on what needs a parent's okay first:

- ☐ Downloading a new app or game.
- ☐ Private messaging.
- ☐ Posting a photo.
- ☐ Accepting a friend request.
- ☐ Buying anything online.
- ☐ Meeting an online contact in person.

Write the boundaries down and post them. A boundary your child can see is easier to keep than one they have to remember. Give a warning before screen time ends, and use a timer your child can watch, so the stop is expected and not a surprise.

Be the example. Your child learns more from how you use your phone than from the rules you set. Follow the family rules yourself, especially devices away at meals and at bedtime.

Tool 7: Digital Literacy

Help your child question what they see. Digital safety is also about judging information. Artificial intelligence can now make a false picture, video, or voice look and sound real.

Teach your child to ask:

- Who made this, and why?
- Where did the information come from?
- Can I check it somewhere else?
- Is someone trying to make me angry, afraid, excited, or rushed?
- Could this picture, video, or voice be fake?
- Should I share this before I know it is true?

"I saw it online" should never automatically mean "it is true."

A child who takes words at face value is easier to fool. Give them one plain signal to watch for: **a message that tells you to hurry or to keep a secret is a warning sign.** When they see one, they stop and show a trusted adult.

Tool 8: Block, Report, and Tell

Your child should know what to do before something inappropriate happens. Teach five words in order: **Pause. Save. Block. Report. Tell.**

Knowing the words is not enough. Practice them.

- [ ] In each app and game, my child has shown me where the block button is.
- [ ] My child knows how to take a screenshot on their device.
- [ ] We have practiced again after adding a new app or game.
- [ ] My child has shown me where the report button is.
- [ ] My child can name three trusted adults they would tell.

Tell your child: "**If someone says you will be in trouble if you tell me, that is even more reason to tell me.**" Asking for help is a digital safety skill.

Talk About Image Threats Before They Happen

Some people who contact children online work to get a photo, then use it as a threat. They demand money, more images, or that the child hurt themselves or someone else. Groups such as 764 target children this way, often meeting them in games and moving them to a private chat on another app. A child who feels scared and ashamed is less likely to tell, and that is what the person is counting on.

AI tools can now make a fake image of a real child from an ordinary photo. A threat built on a fake image is just as frightening, and it needs the same response.

Say this to your child now, while nothing is wrong:

- "**If anyone ever threatens you with a picture, real or fake, you will not be in trouble with me. Come to me right away.**"
- "Don't pay, don't send anything else, and don't delete the chat. We will handle it together."

Saying it early matters. A child who has already heard these words knows where to go on the worst night.

What to Do When Something Happens picks up from here. It has the CASEN Safety Circle™ page for naming trusted adults, the warning signs of unsafe online contact, and the full steps to take when something happens.

The CASEN Compass™ Is a Digital Safety Tool

Apps, games, and online trends will keep changing. Your child needs more than a list of today's risks. They need a way to think.

Compass point	What it means	Your child asks
❤️ Connection	Build healthy relationships	Is this a healthy interaction or relationship?
🛡️ Safety	Protect yourself and others.	Is this safe for me and for other people?
📣 Advocacy	Use your voice to help yourself and others	Do I need to say no, set a boundary, report something, or ask for help?
🧭 Navigation	Make wise choices	What is the wisest choice I can make next?

Here is how the Compass works in a real moment. A player your child has gamed with for weeks offers free game currency if they move to a private chat on another app.

- ❤️ **Connection:** Would a real friend need to move me somewhere private?
- 🛡️ **Safety:** Moving off the game breaks one of our online-only friend rules.
- 📣 **Advocacy:** I can say, "My family has a rule," and tell a parent.
- 🧭 **Navigation:** The wisest next step is to say no and show my parent the message.

Practice with made-up situations like this one until the four questions come without thinking.

Your Family Digital Safety Checkup

The tools above walk you through the settings. Before you finish, make sure you have talked with your child about each of these, and talk again whenever they get a new device, app, or game.

- Cyberbullying.
- Scams and suspicious links.
- What to do if someone asks for an image or threatens them with one.
- What to do if someone asks them to keep a secret.

Don't Just Monitor. Prepare.

Parents cannot watch every click, and children will not always have an adult beside them when they have to make a decision.

That is why CASEN's approach goes beyond monitoring technology. **We prepare the child using the technology.** Our goal is to help children recognize unhealthy situations, protect themselves and others, speak up when they need help, and make wiser decisions, even when no adult is standing next to them.

How Ready Is Your Child?

Digital tools can help protect children. They cannot tell you whether your child has the skills to handle a hard social situation online.

The free CASEN Social Media Readiness Assessment helps you see your child's strengths and areas for growth across Connection, Safety, Advocacy, and Navigation.

TAKE THE FREE ASSESSMENT

Trusted Resources

Resource	What it offers
Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)	Online safety guidance for children, parents, caregivers, and educators
Federal Trade Commission (FTC)	Guidance on children's privacy, parental controls, scams, gaming, and devices.
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)	Resources on online exploitation and child safety. Report exploitation or image threats through the CyberTipline or at 1-800-843-5678.
StopBullying.gov	Federal information on bullying and cyberbullying.
Take It Down (NCMEC)	Free, anonymous help removing nude or sexual images of a minor, real or AI-made, from participation platforms.
Understood.org	A resource available to people with learning and thinking differences. They provide information on the challenges, struggles, and barriers, as well as opportunities to help people with learning and thinking differences reach their goals.

When there is an immediate threat to a child's physical safety, call 911 or your local emergency number.

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.

Educational and Safety Disclaimer

This resource is intended for educational purposes. No technology, parental control, privacy setting, or safety strategy can eliminate all online risk. Families should consider their child's age, developmental needs, abilities, and circumstances when deciding on safeguards. This resource does not replace individualized legal, medical, mental health, educational, law-enforcement, or other professional guidance.