What is a family agreement and how do we make one?

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The internet and other forms of technology are wonderful learning and socialising tools for our children. However, when used inappropriately, they can cause great harm and distress. By being proactive in establishing and recording guidelines for technology use in consultation with your whole family, the risks of harm from technology can be greatly reduced. The resulting document, known as a family agreement, is a great tool because it enables everyone to have their say, ensuring that the rules have been agreed upon by all involved.

When negotiating a family agreement, make sure that your children understand that the purpose is to build a positive relationship between family members. The most effective agreements are those where mutual decisions are made. Remain calm when your children discuss these issues with you, staying solution-focused and asking lots of questions before giving answers. Try to keep your finished agreement as clear, simple, concise and manageable as you possibly can. And finally, consider revisiting your family agreement annually. As your children grow, their interests will change and this will impact on what is important to include in a family agreement.

In terms of what gets covered in the agreement, the most important factors to consider are

•the amount of time that can be spent online

•when and how mobile can be used

•which websites are permissible and which are not

•what information is allowed to be downloaded, uploaded or shared

•consequences for unsafe or unacceptable use of technology

There are some basic agreements that apply to all types of technology, and these need to be discussed first. Request that your child to agree to

•discuss with a parent or carer if they have received cruel or threatening messages or messages with inappropriate content

•tell an adult if they stumble across something that is inappropriate or frightening

•treat others online with respect and do the right thing, just as they would in the world offline

In addition to these fundamental points, here are some further, technology-specific examples demonstrating potential points of agreement:

Using the Internet

•only access the internet in a shared family location, not in bedrooms

•treat passwords like toothbrushes and never share them with anyone (except with family, if that is part of your agreement)

•discuss with you before giving out any personal information or signing up for anything online

•check with you before downloading or uploading files from YouTube or a file-sharing website

•abide by an agreed-upon schedule to prevent unlimited online access

Mobile Phones

•keep the phone out of the bedroom after bedtime

•obtain permission from friends and family members before taking pictures or videos of them with their mobile phone

•agree upon a basic framework for what is and is not acceptable sharing of images

•pay a percentage of the bill (depending on age and frequency of use)

Social Media

•only network with people they already know in real life

•make sure security settings are set to friends-only or private

•never share personal, identifiable information (such as passwords, addresses, phone numbers or school details)

•never meet an online-only friend without an adult present

•show you the images they intend to post onto their social networking site to ensure they are appropriate

•only use webcams in shared family locations, not in bedrooms

•ignore junk emails and don't open files from people they don't know

•avoid unmonitored chat rooms

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