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Surf Smart Program helps youth safely navigate social media

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Local parent and Surf Smart program participant Lindsey Fanning (left) sits with Ashley MacPherson (right), a Community Outreach Worker with SchoolsPlus Pictou County East. Surf Smart, developed by SchoolsPlus in collaboration with the Pictou County Mental Wellness Roundtable with funding from Aberdeen Health Foundation, is helping parents and youth navigate social media and the digital world safely.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW THESE SALTWIRE VIDEOS



NEW GLASGOW, N.S. — [SchoolsPlus Pictou County](#), in partnership with the [Pictou County Mental Wellness Roundtable](#) and [Aberdeen Health Foundation](#), has developed the Surf Smart initiative, aimed at helping parents, guardians, and youth safely and responsibly navigate social media.

Launched during the 2023-2024 school year across Pictou County schools, the Surf Smart initiative includes the creation of handbooks for both parents/guardians and youth, along with a series of in-person presentations, addressing the growing concerns about the impact of social media on young people.

The program began as a conversation between the Pictou County Mental Wellness Roundtable and SchoolsPlus, sparked by the increasing challenges teens and youth face with social media.

"The Mental Wellness Roundtable approached us to discuss issues impacting teens and youth," explained Ashley MacPherson, a community outreach worker with SchoolsPlus Pictou County East.

"As a SchoolsPlus employee and as a parent of a grade 7 student at the time, I noticed the huge impact that cell phone use in schools was having on kids. The rise in depression and anxiety, especially among teenage girls, is drastic and closely tied to social media use."

MacPherson's firsthand experiences were backed by findings from the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#), which revealed a strong link between excessive social media use and heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts among students.

In response to these findings, SchoolsPlus Pictou County, in collaboration with the Pictou County Mental Wellness Roundtable, [Kids First](#) and New Glasgow Police, crafted these essential resources with funding from the Aberdeen Health Foundation:

- [Surf Smart: A Handbook for Parents & Guardians of Pre-teens & Young Teens](#)
- [Surf Smart: A Handbook for Pre-Teens and Young Teens Getting Started on Social Media](#)
- And a Surf Smart & Be Safe on Social Media Poster featuring a QR code to access the handbooks

Held in various schools across Pictou County from October 2023 to February 2024, the first workshops provided parents and guardians with practical strategies to help their children navigate the digital world safely.

"We designed the program to speak to both kids and parents, with separate handbooks for each group," said MacPherson, emphasizing that the program targets preteens, particularly those aged 11-14, who are just starting to use phones, as well as their parents.

"We also created a presentation for caregivers and are currently working on a classroom presentation for grade 5 students...that might seem young," she adds after a pause, "but we're seeing kids as young as grade 4 bringing cell phones into schools and using social media."

For Lindsay Fanning, a mother of two who participated in one of the first Surf Smart sessions, the program has had a lasting impact on her family. "Social media use is not going away anytime soon, and I knew that I wasn't aware of all the platforms and apps that kids are using today. I wanted to be part of an informed conversation about both the positives and negatives of these platforms. The presentation gave me the chance to ask questions in a safe and non-judgmental space."

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Continued Fanning, "The main takeaway I had was that education and communication are key. It was hard to set boundaries that my children were happy with; however, they understand why these boundaries are necessary and respect what we've put in place."

She also shared an eye-opening insight from the session regarding the potential negative impact of punishing children by taking away their devices. "Ashley spoke about the impact on youth when social media devices are taken away as a punishment. Hearing her explain that FOMO (fear of missing out) is real and can cause symptoms like social anxiety and stress was a revelation for me. It made me rethink how I approach these situations with my children."

"We aimed for a balanced approach," added MacPherson. "Instead of just saying 'phones are bad,' we wanted to offer practical strategies for safe social media use. I was surprised how difficult it was to find clear advice; after attending workshops, reading, and researching, I realized it all comes down to building trust with your kids before they go online. Making collective decisions like the province has just made to keep cell phones out of schools certainly helps, as well as the current movement to delay giving smartphones to kids until 8th or 9th grade."

The full presentation is available online on the [SchoolsPlus Pictou County Facebook Page](#). Additionally, copies of the Surf Smart handbooks can be found at local libraries and school offices throughout Pictou County.

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