Online Safety

About children and the internet

The internet is an amazing tool and offers children the opportunity to learn, research, play games, have fun and connect with family and friends. It is, however, vital to educate children and provide guidance on how to use it safely and positively.

Many parents and carers feel the generation gap with their children when it comes to online = behaviour; they may feel out of their depth when discussing the internet and social media. Remember that you have lots of life experiences and responsibility, and can understand consequences of behaviour.

As a parent it is important to talk about 'digital resilience'. Talking to your child about what they do online, what they must do to keep themselves as safe as possible and what to do if they are upset by something they see online is as important as talking to them about other aspects of their safety such as road safety, safe sex or drinking.

"Digital resilience is the ability to understand when you are at risk online, knowing what to do if anything goes wrong, and being able to recover from difficulties or upsets."
UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS)

Have conversations from a young age

Regular conversations with your child about the online world is important and has a greater impact when it starts at a young age – make this topic as ordinary as chatting about something you've watched on TV. Think about how you might talk about the risks and facts around alcohol or getting home at night. Apply the same approach to online safety. It doesn't have to be 'the big talk' - checking in for even a minute or two can make a big difference.

Set boundaries – but be realistic

The boundaries you set for internet use will depend on the age of your child. It's like teaching your child to cross the road: you'll make sure they hold your hand when they're very young, but as they grow older you want them to assess the risks and stay safe more independently.

Whatever age your child is, it's a good idea to sit down as a family and develop some rules about internet and mobile use. Infants and pre-schoolers may already be playing simple games on devices and parents should be supervising their access. Once they get to school and tell you about their friends' devices and what they are doing, you can agree how much time your child spends online and set boundaries. You might decide there are no phones or devices at mealtimes, and that they shouldn't go online just before bed or have a phone/tablet in the bedroom at night, as this may affect their sleep. You can often set timers on tablets or mobiles to limit internet use – but try to help your child manage it for themselves as well.

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You can also set up parental controls to stop your child from accessing harmful content online, but be aware that your child is likely to learn how to get round these. That's why it's important to make sure your child is able to make good decisions for themselves.

Lead by example

Children look to their parents as role models, so behave as you want your child to behave. Talk to them about your own experience of the online world. Show them sites and apps that you like, and explain why you like them. Show them how to use the internet in a positive way – to research things, to do homework, to talk to family, and to find out about the world. This helps them to have a critical eye.

You can also talk about your own less positive experiences online. If you feel irritated by the 'perfect' photos people share of their summer holidays on social media, then being open with your child about this might be a good thing. It could help them to understand that the 'perfect' images people share on social media shouldn't always be taken at face value.

Encourage them to be mindful of their own behaviour towards others. Being kind and respecting others is as important online as it is in your everyday interactions.

Ask your child about the apps and websites they want to use

It can be easy to feel like the world's moved on since you were a child, and that you don't understand the latest technology, apps or social media that your child is using. But don't use this as an excuse not to get involved.

Ask your child to teach you about their favourite apps, games or websites. This will help you to have informal conversations around your child's internet use. Talk about what you like about them and whether you have any concerns about them.

If you want to know more about the apps or sites they're using, you can find out a lot by googling them. And if you think they aren't appropriate for their age, be ready to explain why you think this. Wherever possible, make it a joint decision, so they understand the reasons and will stick to it.

Reassure them that they can always talk to you

Research suggests that most children are actually more cautious than adults online, and that most are good at navigating the internet safely. Often when they do come across upsetting content, it's not because they've gone looking for it but because they've found it by accident, or because someone's sent it to them.

It's important to keep calm if you find they've come across something that concerns you. Tell them you won't overreact if they tell you about something they've seen which is worrying them. You'd much rather they talked to you than keeping it to themselves.

Be open about the reality that they are likely to see things online that they're not comfortable with, e.g. nasty comments, sexual content, violent images. If they have already come across this kind of content, ask how they feel having seen them, and think about how they can avoid seeing them again in future. If necessary, help them to report / block content they find disturbing.

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Talk about personal information

Help your child to understand what's meant by personal information, so they can develop an awareness of why it's significant and why they should be cautious about sharing pictures of themselves or information online. While talking to strangers online isn't always a bad thing, talk to them about some of the risks of sharing too much.

Talk to children and teens about consequences and peer pressure. Try to encourage them to think about how they would feel if someone saw certain posts or photos, or if information became public. There are many online resources and films about this so encourage them to watch if it is difficult to talk about (see Thinkuknow link in the Resources section in particular).

Some things for your child to know:

• What you put online stays online. Even things you delete can be saved or screenshotted – including Snapchat snaps meant for just one friend
• Online strangers are still strangers. Forums and group chats can be a great way to connect over things you wouldn't say face to face, but don't feel pressured to share more than you feel comfortable with
• It's easy to over-share on social media sites, especially if you forget who can see your profile. You can use Facebook's friend settings to create lists so that only people you trust can see all your updates
• Privacy is possible. Make sure you use social media site settings to protect your information. Don't hesitate to block anyone who makes you feel uncomfortable

Talk about social media

Although most social media sites are officially 13+, most children sign up when they're much younger. Guide your child about setting up accounts – remind them that every social media platform has privacy settings, and show them how to use them. Make sure your child understands about how to keep information private, and how to report or block things that aren't appropriate. Encourage them to be open with you. However, even if you think you've got a complete overview of the situation, it's very possible they have a social media account they're not sharing with you!

Show them the positives of social media – that it can help them be creative, have fun and talk to friends – but also help them to understand that the lives people live online may not reflect the lives they live offline, and the 'perfect' lives that people present probably aren't real.

Help your child to understand that they shouldn't feel the need to be available all the time on social media. It's okay to take a break, and they don't need to take part in every conversation.

Talk about sexting

When someone sends sexually explicit messages or shares sexual, naked or semi-naked images or videos of themselves or others via smartphones, laptops or tablets, it is called sexting (also pic for pic, dirties or trading nudes). Children and young people often sext each other to join in with a group, test their sexual identity, to explore their sexual feelings, connect with new people on social media, and sometimes because somebody asks them to send an explicit message (often persistently) and they don't know how to say no.

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Talk about this topic with your child, however uncomfortable it feels, and let them know that it's illegal for anyone of any age to take, send, save and download explicit images of anyone below the age of 18. It's also useful to emphasise the risks of "once it's out there, it's out there" and that when this happens they lose control over how many times it might be shared with other people. This has been known to lead to bullying and blackmail.

Talk about gaming

It's easy to turn a blind eye to the games your child is playing, particularly if you didn't grow up playing the same sorts of games yourself. It's worth checking PEGI ratings, which have more detailed information than ratings for films. If your child wants to buy a game that looks like it's extremely violent or too old for them, then trust your judgement if you don't feel it's appropriate. The most important thing is getting involved.
Talk about cyberbullying

Talk to your child about the fact that bullying isn't okay, whether it happens at school, at home or on the internet. If they're receiving nasty messages, or people are posting unwanted things about them or they feel harassed, they should do something about it.

Encourage your child to talk to you. Even if it seems like a small thing, it can really help to talk things through, and there may be ways to get it sorted out.

Make sure your child understands how to block and report the people involved, and to use the privacy settings to limit what people can see on their profiles.

Be clear about taking responsibility about what they post from a young age. Help your child to understand the effect that their posts might have on others, and that they shouldn't say anything online that they wouldn't say in person.

Act on warning signs

If something is wrong, you may pick up on it. It's important to act on the warning signs if you start to feel concerned. Talk to your child openly, listen to what they have to say, don't rush to judgement, and make sure they know that you'll always be there for them. Remain calm and be understanding. Check as many details as you can, find out if there were any adults involved and ask how the child is feeling.

If you're worried that your child is being groomed online or sexually exploited report your concerns to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Safety Centre www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre . CEOP is part of the National Crime Agency and can investigate what is happening to ensure the safety and wellbeing of your child.

What can help? What to do next

These are some things that can make a difference:

1. Think about how you guide your family in the real world and how you can do the same in the digital world.

2. Question your own behaviour and what we, as adults, are modelling.

3. Try out the technologies your child enjoys - download some of their music and have a go at games they like. Look at the latest social media trends they are talking about.. Download the apps and see how they work, or google a guide to it.

4. Talk to your own friends and family about how they manage their children's digital lives. Use some of the resources to make sure you can guide on privacy settings and age restrictions.

5. Bear in mind that policing is not equipping young people with skills for life – guidance and education are essential.

6. Remind older siblings that websites they use may not be suitable for younger brothers and sisters. Be aware of PEGI game ratings – 18 is usually 18 for a good reason.

7. Make digital issues part of ordinary, everyday conversations - talking about subjects like cyberbullying, sexting and gaming and help them understand the consequences.

8. When you're talking about bullying, sex and relationships and other issues, don't forget to include the online aspects.

9. Talk together about 'friends'. Agree what a true friend is, and discuss the problems with people who ask to be your 'friend' online.

10. Talk to your children about whether the issues they face are different online and offline.

11. Don't be afraid to set boundaries and rules

12. Talk to your child about their online reputation and how content (their digital footprint) could remain for years.

13. If your child does tell you about something, try not to over react as it will discourage them from turning to you again. Remember, they often do not want to see some of the content they might stumble across.

14. There are fantastic resources for parents and carers. Once a month or so, check out the websites in the resources list on the next pages. They will give you up-to-date information about the latest online trends.

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Finding support

Thinkuknow
www.thinkuknow.co.uk
Information and advice around keeping children and young people safe online. You can find resources for different age groups, ass well as films, Q&As and advice around privacy, bullying, grooming, sexting, selfies and more.

ParentZone
www.parentzone.org.uk
Information for families and schools on issues that are caused or amplified by the internet. Advice covers areas such as social media, apps, a guide on how to talk to your child, digital footprints and more.

Internet Matters
www.internetmatters.org
Not-for-profit organisation helping to keep children safe in the digital world. Comprehensive information on specific issues, advice for parents, controls and how to get further help or report issues.

Kidscape
www.kidscape.org.uk
Equipping young people, parents and professionals with the skills to tackle bullying and address safeguarding issues. Parent Advice Line open Monday-Wednesday from 9.30am-2.30pm.

Phone: 020 7823 5430

Information for parents: www.kidscape.org.uk/advice/advice-for-parents-and-carers/internet-safety-and-addressing-online-risk

UK Safer Internet Centre
www.saferinternet.org.uk
Provides a range of resources for primary and secondary age ranges, as well as information for parents.

Their helpline provides support to professionals working with children around online safety issues. Open Monday-Friday 10am-4pm.

Phone: 0344 381 4772
Email: helpline@saferinternet.org.uk

NSPCC
www.nspcc.org.uk
Advice on a range of online issues, including how to talk to your child about online activity, at www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety

Their helpline provides information and advice to anyone worried about something a young person may have experienced online. Open Monday-Friday 8am-10pm and weekends from 9am-6pm.

Phone: 0808 800 5000
Email: help@nspcc.org.uk

Ditch the Label
www.ditchthelabel.org
Advice and blogs about cyberbullying and updates on the latest social media apps.

CBBC
www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/findoutmore/stay-safe-facts
Internet information and advice for primary-aged children.

YoungMinds
#Take20
www.youngminds.org.uk/take20
Ideas and suggestions to help parents find 20 minutes to do something together with their child to support confidence, self-esteem and resilience.
Parents Lounge
www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge
Our Parents Helpline experts answer questions on exam stress.
Top Tips
www.youngminds.org.uk/take20/top-tips-for-you-and-your-child
Supporting a child through a time of difficulty or change.

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Finding support

Childline
www.childline.org.uk
If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small.

24/7 helpline: 0800 1111

Chat 1:1 with an online counsellor: www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat

To email: sign up on the website, so you can send your message without needing to use your name or email address, at www.childline.org.uk/registration

The Mix
www.themix.org.uk
If you're under 25 you can talk to The Mix about anything that's troubling you over the phone, email or webchat. You can also use their phone or online counselling service.

Helpline open daily 4-11pm: 0808 808 4994

Email: www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us

Webchat open daily 4-11pm: www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team

Counselling service: www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/the-mix-counselling-service

Youth Access
www.youthaccess.org.uk
Offers information about advice and counselling services in the UK for young people aged 12-25 years

Youth Wellbeing Directory
www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing
Lists local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.

MindEd for Families
www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html
MindEd for families is a website where you can hear about other parents' experiences and find clear, helpful guidance on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

YoungMinds Crisis Messenger
Provides free, 24/7 text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis.

Text YM to 85258

Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.

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