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KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE

a guide for
PARENTS



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For parents, their child's safety on the Internet is as important as their safety on the streets; you taught your children not to talk to strangers or go off with people they don't know, so they definitely know better to do the same thing online, right?

For many parents, though, eSafety is a bit of an unknown quantity. Progress moves quickly, and these days even very young children easily grow familiar with using digital technology. For children born after the creation of the internet, the online world is a home from home; education experts call them 'digital natives' for just this reason.

But being comfortable and confident with technology isn't necessarily the same as being safe. Even a child who confidently walks home from school alone can run into danger on the way. And online, as in real life, it's possible to protect against these risks by ensuring your child knows how to stay safe in their environment.

A bright and curious child can easily be drawn into online worlds that they didn't set out to find; the very real risks of grooming, sexual exploitation, radicalisation, and extremism are all testimony to the fact that mistakes are easy to make and best fixed quickly.

Many parents find it difficult to talk to their children about topics like sex, and many children are reluctant to mention having seen images or messages with inappropriate or sexual content for fear of getting into trouble. While it's natural for parents to react to this with fear or anger, it's also important to remember that the child is not to blame for the actions of a child or adult who may be acting with malicious intent.

In an increasingly technologically adept society, unsupervised internet access is the same kind of significant milestone as a first unaccompanied bike ride or Saturday afternoon in town. It's an inevitable change that carries an element of danger, but with preparation and support children can be helped to identify the risks and keep themselves safe.



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Online Games

The video games industry is worth billions worldwide, and few parents can deny the appeal of gaming to children of all ages.

Across Europe, PEGI ratings advise buyers of the age-appropriacy and content of new games, and parents should ensure they check the rating on the box or online before they buy. PEGI also recommend that parents supervise all play, or play the game with their child.

In recent years, consoles have become increasingly community-based, with team play and chat options now the norm for many franchises. Services like Xbox Live and PlayStation Network function like social networking sites, allowing users to link with other gamers; equal discretion should be used here as on social networks themselves.

PlayStation, Xbox and Wii consoles all have parental controls to limit chat options and manage the age ratings on downloadable content like films and games; ensuring these are put in place when the console is set up for the first time is easier than managing the issue retroactively, but it's never too late to set the controls up or change the options.

Setting up an account for each child that uses the console is recommended, as it ensures that content and access can be tailored to the age of each child; however, keeping younger children from logging into their older siblings' accounts may be a matter that requires careful discussion and explanation of the risks.

Games consoles with voice chat or community connectivity can also enable cyberbullying, and children using these services should be aware of the consequences of their online conduct. Using someone's race, gender, nationality, religion or sexuality to insult them online is a breach of hate crime laws and the Malicious Communications Act, and children should be made aware that many game servers operate a zero-tolerance exclusion and banning policy for users caught breaching their terms and conditions.



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Instant Messaging

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While many social networks allow private messaging, in recent years several apps have sprung up that are designed for messaging alone. It's easy to see how the ability to send text and images privately allows users to share explicit sexual content to a particular recipient, and young people should be aware that this carries sizeable risks. Instant messaging sites have also become popular amongst extremist groups as a means to radicalise new members.

Apps and programs such as Kik, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Yik Yak provide users with the means to contact friends in a way that's free, disposable, and private. Snapchat allows users to send photos which will erase themselves from the recipient's phone a few seconds after being opened – more secure than other ways to send the same picture, but easily bypassed if the recipient takes a screenshot of their phone which can then be stored or shared online.

Following a number of young people travelling to the Middle East to join extremist groups, the Government has begun to pay special attention to the role that the internet plays in radicalising young people. From this, we know that groups will use social networks like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube to draw young people in, and then continue a conversation privately using instant messaging apps.

This approach means that the conversation takes place out of sight of users who may report it, and that no trace of the contact appears in the text messages on the users' phones or in their email accounts. Because of the difficulty in finding and tracking these conversations, parents can be the best people to identify if their child is becoming radicalised.

A child that has been in contact with extremist material may change their clothes, behaviour, or interests, be secretive about what they do online, possess phones or other technology you didn't provide, voice sympathy for extremist causes, or think that their culture and beliefs are under threat.



Sexting, p10

Where can I go for help? p16

Social networks can vary in popularity, and new ones launch every year. The following are popular with young people now:

Facebook

Children should be made aware of the risks of adding as friends people they don't know; they should also be wary of uploading images or posting status updates that give away too much information about themselves. Facebook enables users to control who sees their content by adjusting their security settings.

Twitter

Children who use Twitter to keep in touch with their friends should use private messages where possible or set their accounts to 'private' – this ensures that only the person they're tweeting can read their tweet. Users should be aware that deleted tweets can still be visible, so discretion is advised.

Instagram

Media-literate children are proud to collect 'likes' on photos they've uploaded, but posts are visible to the public by default. Instant messaging is possible now, enabling users to send images privately.

Tumblr

A microblogging platform popular with teens and young adults, Tumblr allows users to share text posts, images, videos, links and music on a public blog or through private messages. Tumblr's privacy settings can be awkward to manage and, despite site policy, adult content is easy to find.

Vine

Although it's difficult to imagine how much trouble a user can get into within the confines of a six-second video, sexual content and images of drug use are freely available. Privacy settings can be altered to limit visibility to approved followers only.



Instant Messaging, p5
Video Chat, p7

The next generation of instant messaging and online chat, video chat is becoming increasingly popular due to improved broadband speeds and the prevalence of cameras in new technology. The practical advantages for business and leisure can't be underestimated, but the benefits also carry a degree of risk.

While Skype, Facetime, and ooVoo allow users to video chat with people they know, sites such as Omegle and ChatRoulette encourage and enable their users to talk to strangers. While this may be appropriate for adults, the amount of nudity and sexual content found on these sites make them entirely unsuitable for young people.

Just like with talking to someone on Facebook or MSN Messenger, even sharing video chat with a friend can be open to misuse. ooVoo allows users to record their video chats, and it's possible to download software that allows users to capture and save streaming video – meaning that whatever a child does in front of their webcam can potentially be saved and shared online.

Because of this, parents should make sure their child understands that being asked, by a friend or a stranger, to undress or touch themselves on a webcam is unacceptable; nor should anyone else show themselves doing the same. In all cases, the child should exit the chat immediately, block the user if possible, and tell someone they trust what happened.

It's also possible for a hacker to gain access to a webcam and start it recording without the computer's owner knowing. Many webcams have a light to show when they're in use, but children should still be encouraged to keep the webcam out of their bedroom and cover the lens when it's not in use. Most of all, children should feel able to approach you with any concerns about material they've seen or messages they've received online; many children avoid saying anything because they think they'll be trouble, so parents should be ready to respond in a calm and supportive way.



These days, mobile phones can be as much a sign of status for children as they are for adults. While parents find it comforting to know that their children are always able to contact them, children instead view their phones as a combination of communication, entertainment, convenience, and an indication of how cool they are. The growing popularity of tablet computers, undoubtedly appealing for a child, has done nothing to diminish this.

However, while a mobile phone may seem comparatively harmless, a few basic safety tips can improve your child's safety and enjoyment. The NHS advises that children under 16 should avoid making prolonged phone calls if possible, so it may be better for children to text, use instant messaging, or wear a hands-free set.

On the subject of apps, parents should be sure to explain the costs associated with in-app purchases and advertising found in some mobile games, and should also pay attention to the PEGI ratings that some games now display. Children may also use their own phones to sign up for subscription services or enter television competitions, not realising how expensive a premium-rate text or phone call can be.

Camera and video recording are obviously open to misuse, and children should be warned against sharing images with anyone except close friends; this is equally true of instant messaging apps. Similarly, the internet access provided by mobile phones is harder to monitor than the family PC, and many parents prefer to disable a phone's Bluetooth and internet access before giving it to their child.

Even with the most basic phones, parents should ensure their child follows basic safety rules: don't let your phone draw your attention away from traffic, don't leave your phone on display where it's easily taken, don't give out your mobile number to anyone you don't know well, and don't use your phone to bully or harass others.



For many parents, cyberbullying will be an unwelcome addition to the types of bullying that worried them when they were at school. But for all the advantages that digital technology gives, it has also enabled bullying to go from a relatively small-scale daytime problem to a much more invasive 24-hour issue.

Cyberbullying can target any aspect of a child's character, physicality, or social situation. But while the message has not changed, the medium has: bullies can now send abusive texts or images to a victim's mobile phone, use message boards or chat rooms to post hateful messages to or about their victim, or flood social networks with images or words designed to harass and degrade their victim. Cyberbullying's similarity to the aggressive online tactics adults call 'trolling' is plain to see.

Cyberbullying also provides the means for children to bully adults: teachers in particular may be bullied by their pupils. Additionally, children may be victimised because they don't own the most recent smartphone or mp3 player, or because they don't own a phone at all.

It's still true that a victim may bully others in order to lessen the pressure on themselves, particularly when protected by the physical and emotional distance of the internet. For all these reasons, schools are particularly keen to tackle cyberbullying at the earliest opportunity.

If your child is a victim of cyberbullying, make sure to keep a copy of all messages to pass on as evidence. Encourage your child to report all incidents to you or to a teacher, and ensure they don't open messages or answer phone calls that could be from the bullies.

To help schools take a stand against cyberbullying, all parents should make clear that bullying is unacceptable, encourage their child not to participate when they see someone being bullied, and make sure a child feels comfortable reporting or challenging the bullying of themselves or others.



Mobile Phones, p8

Where can I go for help? p16

A relatively recent phenomenon, sexting has become more prevalent as selfies have become more popular. But unlike a selfie, sexting can have serious and unintended consequences.

We know that girls tend to send pictures in response to a request from a boy, but boys tend to take and send pictures without being asked to. We also know that girls feel pressure to send pictures, but that they also fear the potential consequences of such an image ceasing to be private – being circulated around her school, shown to the recipient's friends, or posted on websites designed for that purpose, for instance.

In the UK, asking for, taking, possessing, publishing, or sending on a nude or semi-nude photo of a child under 18, or an image edited to look like one, is an offence under child pornography laws. Police forces are anxious not to criminalise children who create and send such images, but recognise that they must respond to the problem to prevent the pictures falling into the wrong hands.

In 2014 a Nottingham schoolgirl was given a police caution for sending an explicit image of herself to her boyfriend; in some cases, UK law could mean that both sender and recipient could be prosecuted and placed on the Sex Offenders' Register. A conviction like this will stay with the young person well into their future, making it difficult for them to secure employment or engage with their own child's school activities.

Moreover, young women having their explicit images made public – sometimes by malicious ex-boyfriends, known as 'revenge porn' – is a profoundly damaging, shaming, and harmful experience. Girls have been forced out of their schools, shunned by their friends, and attempted suicide because someone they trusted made a private image public. Because of the repercussions for both boys and girls, parents are urged to explain the risks to any child that has access to a smartphone or webcam.



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Where can I go for help? p16

The ready availability of porn on the internet is no secret, and tech-literate children are increasingly exposed to far stronger material at earlier ages than was previously possible. For this reason, parents are encouraged to discuss porn and sex with their children honestly and openly.

Children don't even have to be looking for porn in order to be exposed to explicit images and video. Often children are exposed to inappropriate material through pop-up or sidebar ads, or find it through searching for a term they heard from another child at school; this can be a particular issue for children who have just started secondary school and are in contact with much older pupils.

Most adults are aware that porn is not necessarily an accurate representation of 'real' sex, but experts are concerned that children's expectations of sex are being seriously affected by material that portrays the degradation or mistreatment of women. Research by the Children's Commissioner found that boys often "believe that they have an absolute entitlement to sex at any time", and girls may "feel they have no alternative but to submit to boys' demands, regardless of their own wishes."

Fortunately, the primary and secondary school PSHE curricula contain lesson plans designed to explore many aspects of personal relationships, including love and sexuality, healthy relationships, consent, and body image. While previous sex education covered only the essentials of sex and contraception, the updated course is designed to provide a comprehensive guide to sex and relationships.

In order to back up the positive representation of healthy sexual relationships shown in PSHE classes, parents should feel prepared to talk to their child about the social aspects of sex – such as consent, the law, and intimate partner violence.



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Where can I go for help? p16

In recent years, teachers and doctors alike have become concerned about the growing number of websites which promote anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders as lifestyle choices rather than illnesses. Rather than providing a safe space where those recovering can support each other, Pro-Ana, Pro-Mia, and Pro-ED sites are used to share tips on how to survive on minimal nutrition, advice on how to conceal their eating habits from friends and family, and “thinspiration” images designed to reinforce harmful messages about weight and size.

Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia sites also appeal to users by providing a sense of exclusivity and of joining an elite group, by glamorising extreme weight loss and sharing images of underweight models and actresses, and by denying the seriousness of the illness.

A child with an eating disorder may miss meals or refuse to eat with their family, repeatedly weigh themselves or look in the mirror, call themselves fat, count calories or set target weights, exercise excessively or secretly, take food from cupboards to binge eat in private, or visit the bathroom to vomit after a meal. Girls who lose a lot of weight suddenly may also find their periods become irregular or stop.

The reasons for developing an eating disorder can be as individual as the young people affected – some may be triggered by bullying about their weight, some may begin after a sudden or serious change within their family, and some may find an eating disorder gives them a sense of control during a period of stress.

Although public perception implies that anorexia and bulimia is an issue affecting young women, specialists report an increasing amount of boys and young men being treated for eating disorders – perhaps as much as 10 per cent of the male population. While it can be reassuring for a young person to know that someone else understands how they’re feeling, support should encourage recovery, not continue the harmful patterns of behaviour.



For young people who experience depression, anxiety, or other mental health problems, it can be reassuring for them to find others who understand how they feel. Online communities such as Tumblr have been instrumental in providing a safe and sometimes anonymous space for young people to share their experiences, particularly if they've been struggling with thoughts of self-harm or suicide. For this reason, these sites provide a list of organisations which can help young people cope with what they're going through.

However, for some young people the line between sharing their problems and encouraging others to give in to the urge to self-harm becomes blurred. Accepting a child's urge to harm themselves can be an important part of their recovery process; sites that encourage this behaviour without ever encouraging the individual to seek help, as some websites do, are irresponsible and potentially very dangerous.

If your child feels ready to talk to you about what's troubling them, just listening non-judgementally may be the best kind of support you can offer. You'll have questions you'll want to ask, but it's important that your child is able to talk freely about their problems without fearing that you'll be angry.

If your son or daughter self-harms, it may be helpful to work together to find other ways that they can deal with the urge to hurt themselves; some people find it useful to hold ice cubes or snap an elastic band worn around their wrist.

It's also important to remember that not everyone who experiences depression has an obvious 'reason' to feel the way they do; some people can feel low without any obvious cause, and may feel worse still if they worry they don't have anything to be depressed about. Feelings of sadness, depression, fear, or anxiety are always valid and should be recognised and accepted for what they are.



Parents of tweens or teens will recognise how difficult it can be to discuss serious issues with them – if they feel confident in what they're doing, even the most well-meaning advice will be treated like a lecture. However, picking your moment and maintaining an open and interested tone can make the conversation easier.

If your child uses the internet alone in their room, rather than in a shared area, it can be difficult to know which sites they're visiting and who they're talking to. Just as you've taught your child not to speak to strangers, they need to understand that strangers online should be off-limits too.

Younger children may be willing to show you around the sites they use regularly, particularly if they think that doing so will put your mind at rest. This doesn't have to feel like a punishment; you're just taking in interest in what they're into.

Filtering and blocking programs may be useful for younger children, but many teenagers will be able to bypass the block; sites called proxy servers or virtual private networks have been used for years to bypass such systems in schools and colleges, and they're not hard to find or use.

Their use should be discouraged, though, as most proxy servers contain malware that can seriously damage your computer. It may even be easier in the long run to educate your child about how to stay safe online and agree on which sites they'll visit than to risk them using a harmful proxy site.

Primary and secondary school curricula now contain material on eSafety, and children are given age-appropriate advice from Key Stage One onwards. So much of your child's education will depend on their computer literacy that there's never a bad time to start teaching it.



A child who is being groomed may...

- Come home with unexpected gifts, particularly mobile phones.
- Use their mobile or computer excessively or secretly.
- Meet friends in unusual places.
- Have relationships with older partners.

A child who is being exploited may...

- Exhibit mood swings and changes in behaviour.
- Top their phone up frequently, or have several SIM cards.
- Suffer from low self-esteem or radically change their appearance.
- Dress or behave in an unusually or overtly sexualised manner.
- Develop eating disorders, suffer spells of depression, or begin to self-harm.
- Lose contact with friends and socialise with older adults.
- Associate with gangs or with known gang members.
- Be unusually secretive, particularly about where they've been and who they were with.
- Use drugs or alcohol.
- Be truant or absent from school or clubs.
- Spend time in places of concern, such as hotels.
- Repeatedly go missing from home, particularly overnight.
- Pick up unexplained injuries or sexually transmitted infections.
- Be seen getting into cars with unknown adults, or see unfamiliar cars outside the house.
- Wash or bathe excessively, especially after coming home from being missing.

If you have urgent concerns about the welfare or safety of a child, always call 999. For non-urgent concerns, dial 101.



Where can I go for help? p16

Talking to your children about sex

www.nhs.uk/livewell/talkingaboutsex/pages/talkingtoyourteen.aspx

Talking to your children about eating disorders

www.nhs.uk/livewell/mentalhealth/pages/talkingtoteens.aspx

Talking to your children about drugs

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/drugs/Pages/Drugsandyourkids.aspx

Cyberbullying

<http://www.bullying.co.uk/cyberbullying/>

Radicalisation

<http://www.internetmatters.org/issues/radicalisation/>

Reporting extremism

<https://www.gov.uk/report-terrorism>

Suicide and self-harm

http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_parents/whats_worrying_you_about_your_child/self-harm

Information on sexting

So You Got Naked Online booklet, Southwest Grid for Learning

www.swgfl.org.uk/sextinghelp

Setting up parental controls

www.saferinternet.org.uk

Safer internet use

www.thinkuknow.co.uk

Childline

www.childline.org.uk