

(See NSPCC <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/help-and-advice/for-parents/online-safety>)

When online, children and young people can learn new things, get help with homework, express themselves creatively and connect with friends and family.

There are also risks, but by understanding and talking about the dangers you can help keep your child safe online.

Children may face risks such as cyberbullying or being exposed to inappropriate content. Whether you're unsure about what happens online or are familiar with new technology, it's important that you talk to your child about staying safe.

It may feel daunting, but you don't need to be an expert on the internet. Understanding what children do online and the risks they face will help you keep your child safe online.

What children do online and through social networking

Children and young people go online to connect with friends, and make new ones, to browse the internet for information, chat with others and play games. They may:

- search for information or content on search engines like Google and Bing
- share images and watch videos through websites or mobile apps like Instagram, Pinterest, Vine and YouTube
- use social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter
- write or reply to messages on forums and message boards
- play games alone or with others through websites, apps or game consoles
- chat with other people through online games, BBM (Blackberry Messenger), games consoles, webcams, social networks and tools like Whatsapp, Instagram, Musically and Snapchat.

Online Safety

As a parent, you need to talk to your child about how they can stay safe online, set rules about what they can do and agree boundaries of how they should behave.

You can also use parental controls on social networks, online games and browsers or software that can filter or monitor what your child can see.

Preventing your children from using the internet or mobile phones will not keep them safe online, so it's important to have conversations that help your child understand how to stay safe and what to do if they ever feel scared or uncomfortable.

Children and young people spend an average of 12 hours a week online. You should start talking to your child about keeping safe online at an early age.

It's easier to have conversations about online safety little and often, rather than trying to cover everything at once.

As your children get older, and technology changes, make sure you continue talking about what they are doing online and how to stay safe.

Ask your child what they do online

Your child may know more than you about being online, but you can use that to help you understand what they are doing and what controls to put in place.

Children often enjoy showing their parents what they know and have achieved, and it gives you a way to support and encourage them while learning what they know.

To help you understand what they are doing online, start by asking your child:

- which websites do you enjoy spending time on?
- what are the best things to do on these websites?
- which websites would you recommend for a friend?
- what is your favourite game?
- who do you play games with?

Know who your child is talking to online

Children don't think of people they've met online through social networking and online games as strangers, they are just online friends.

So it's important to monitor who your child is talking to. Ask them:

- who do you know that has the most online friends?
- how can they know so many people?
- how do they choose who to become friends with online?

Explain to your child that it is easy for people to lie about themselves online, like their age for example, because you have never met them.

Agree your child will 'friend' a trusted adult on their social networks or online games

You can also become 'friends' with your child so you can see their profile and posts.

Your child may not want to 'friend' you, especially as they get older, but agree with them that they can 'friend' a trusted adult like a 'cool' aunt or uncle who can feedback any worrying or upsetting behaviour.

Set rules and agree boundaries

Establish and explain what the rules are for your child being online. These will depend on your child's age and what you feel is appropriate, but give guidance on:

- the amount of time they can spend online
- the time of day they can go online
- the websites they can visit or activities they can take part in
- sharing images and videos
- how to behave online respectfully and to not post anything they wouldn't say face to face

If your child plays online games:

- check the age rating of all games before they play
- make sure you know who they are playing with and how much information they are sharing with other players
- negotiate the amount of time your child spends playing online games to avoid addiction

Make sure that content is age-appropriate

You know your child best, so check that the websites, social networks and games they are using are suitable for them and their age.

Check that your browser's homepage (the page that you see when you open an internet window) is set to a website that is suitable for your child to see.

Online games, movies and some websites will also have an age rating or minimum age to sign up.

Tell your child to speak to you first before registering on a website or social networking sites like Facebook.

Age limits are an important safety measure. You shouldn't feel pressurised into letting your child sign up or use websites that you feel they are too young for.

Use parental controls to filter, restrict, monitor or report content

Parental controls can help you control what your child can access online, and privacy controls ensure that information stays private. No tool is 100% effective and should not replace conversations with your child.

You can set up parental controls to prevent your child from seeing inappropriate or harmful content online:

- Internet Service Providers (ISPs), such as Virgin Media, TalkTalk, Sky or BT, provide controls to help you filter or restrict content.
- laptops, phones, tablets, games consoles and other devices that connect to the internet will have settings to activate parental controls.
- software packages are available, some for free, that can help you filter, restrict or monitor what your child can see online.

Remember that if your child goes online away from home, the same controls might not be in place at other people's houses or on public Wi-Fi. Agree with your child how they will use public Wi-Fi or let other parents know what your child is or isn't allowed to do online.

Apply controls that are right for your child's age

As your child gets older you can change the level of control that you use.

If your child asks you to remove the controls completely, and you are happy to do so, agree with them in advance what behaviour is acceptable online.

Make sure your child's privacy is protected

Check the privacy settings on any online accounts your child has, for example on Facebook or games, and remind your child to keep their personal information private.

Make sure that there are appropriate security settings in place on any websites that use your child's personal details e.g. Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, Instagram, Snapchat, email accounts

Check your child knows how to use reporting tools

Explain to your child what to do if they see content or are contacted by someone who worries or upsets them. Ensure they know how to use tools to report abuse:

Ways your child can help you

Give tips on how they would tell friends or other children to stay safe online

You can follow up with questions like:

- where did you learn these?
- what would you do if they were worried about anything?

Help you set up a profile on one of their favourite websites

This will give you the opportunity to ask lots of questions like 'what does that mean?' or 'why did you choose that option?'

You can also check if there are any safety features and if your child knows how to use them.

Tell you about a friend or family member that they are 'friends' with through social networking

If they are 'friends' with a family member or someone that you both know, ask your child how they are.

Use it as a way to ask further questions about how your child communicates online.

Play a game with you online

This will help you understand how the game works, if it's appropriate for their age and how they can communicate with other players.

Exposure to inappropriate people and content, including pornography

Children and young people may see illegal or inappropriate content online, such as:

- pornography
- child abuse images
- dangerous advice encouraging eating disorders, self harm or suicide
- excessive violence or race hate materials.

Some websites may contain illegal materials. Others may be legal, but have unregulated advice or are meant for adults only.

Children may access inappropriate content accidentally, or intentionally through curiosity. They may also be enticed by promises of special offers or prizes.

How much illegal or inappropriate content is online?

Although it's difficult to estimate how much content is unsuitable for children, recent figures suggest that there are large amounts of inappropriate content available:

- 9500 web pages were removed by the Internet Watch Foundation worldwide in 2013
- 70,000 indecent images of children were reported to CEOP in 2012
- 100s of pro-eating disorder websites are estimated to exist.

The damaging effects of pornography on children

Children are increasingly accessing pornography online. This is often accidental, although older children may be curious and search for more sexualised or risky content.

Exposure to this content can have distressing and damaging effects on children:

- 28% of 11 to 18 year olds feel that pornography has changed the way they think about relationships.
- 475 counselling sessions were held by ChildLine in 2012/13 with young people who had been exposed to sexually explicit images, including pornographic videos or online content.

Ignoring age restrictions

Some websites and games use age restrictions and checks to ensure that children don't see unsuitable content.

Children must be at least 13 to register on most social networking websites. However, there are often few barriers to prevent them from joining at a younger age.

The age limit is an important safety measure and you shouldn't feel pressurised into letting younger children join these websites.

Friending or communicating with people they don't know

Children and young people may chat or become 'friends' with people they don't know or have never met, on social networks or online games.

The percentage of online friends that children did not know outside of being online was:

- 25% for 12 - 15 year olds in 2013

This makes children vulnerable to bullying, grooming and sharing personal information.

Grooming and sexual abuse

Grooming is where someone builds an emotional connection with a young person in order to sexually abuse them. It can happen on social networking sites, chatrooms and online gaming sites and can also lead to face to face meetings between an adult and a child.

Sharing personal information

Privacy controls can limit who can see your details, although making 'friends' will give someone access to your information.

Switch off or adjust settings using GPS or location tracking: Many apps and social networking sites use software to locate where the user is. Children and young people can also reveal their location by tagging photos, e.g. in Instagram, checking in on Facebook or Foursquare. If apps are not used carefully it can make a young person vulnerable to people know where they live, socialise work or study.

Some 'free' games may also require an extensive profile which game owners could then illegally use to rent or sell the child's data.

Gambling or running up debts

Many online games are free but offer items to purchase such as extra lives or new levels. Children may run up big bills without realising. Gambling sites have strict measures to ensure that their users are adults, but young people aged 18 and over may also be enticed by offers and prizes on gambling websites and build up large debts.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place online, on social networks or through online gaming (game playing). It is a growing problem and includes:

- sending threatening or disturbing text messages
- homophobia, racism or sexism
- making silent, hoax or abusive calls
- creating and sharing embarrassing images or videos
- 'trolling', the sending of menacing or upsetting messages
- excluding children from online games, activities or friendship groups
- setting up hate sites or groups about a particular child
- encouraging young people to self-harm
- voting for someone in an abusive poll
- hijacking or stealing online identities to embarrass a young person or cause trouble using their name
- sending 'sexts' to pressure a child into sending images or other activity

The risks and dangers of cyberbullying

The signs of cyberbullying are not always obvious. It can happen 24 hours a day, seven days a week and can continue even when a child is alone, causing them to feel trapped and unable to escape. Children may be bullied by someone they know or someone using a fake account to remain anonymous.

Cyberbullying can significantly harm a child's physical and emotional health. It can cause:

- feelings of sadness and loneliness
- anxiety and depression
- changes in sleep and eating patterns
- loss of interest in hobbies
- health problems
- self-harm or suicide in extreme cases.

Steps you can take to help keep your child safe

- talk to your child about cyberbullying
- teach them how to behave online
- check the privacy settings on their online accounts
- remind them to keep personal information private, e.g. address, email address or all phone numbers
- encourage them not to respond or retaliate to any bullying
- report and block abuse
- find out how your child's school deals with cyberbullying.

Talking to your child about cyberbullying

If your child has experienced problems with bullying online, they may be worried about talking to you.

But it's important your child knows they can come to you if they are ever upset or worried. If you find it difficult to talk to your child about cyberbullying, try asking:

- what's the funniest thing they've seen online is, then: what's the saddest thing they've seen online, what they would do if someone said something unkind about them or other online?
- whether any of their friends behave differently online and if so why they think this is.
- for advice to help a friend whose child is being bullied online.

Preventing your children from using the internet or mobile phones will not keep them safe from cyberbullying. It may stop them talking to you about their concerns.

Keeping calm and listening to your child will reassure them that they can talk to you if they are ever being bullied or bullying someone online.

Teach your child how to behave online

As well as rules on how to behave at school and at home, explain that there are rules for behaving online so that they can stay safe and respectful of others.

Talk to them about what they think is acceptable to say online. Explain that they:

- shouldn't say things they wouldn't say in person, or
- wouldn't feel comfortable saying in front of you.

You may find it helpful to use news stories or television programmes to start the conversation about what they think of cyberbullying and the actions of the bullies.

What to do if you discover your child has been bullying others

Children may make offensive or unkind comments online, and they may not realise that what they are doing is bullying.

You may feel disappointed or horrified if your child has been bullying others online, but try to keep calm and take some time to consider how to approach the situation.

You can:

- calmly explain to your child that what they're doing is unacceptable
- help them develop a level of empathy. You could ask questions such as: "How do you think that child felt?" "Do you remember how you felt when someone said something unkind to you?"
- Explain the steps you will be taking, e.g. talking to your child's school, and the expectations that you have.
- Ask your child whether they have any questions about why their actions need to change.

Sexting

'Sexting' is an increasingly common activity among children and young people where they share inappropriate or explicit images online or through mobile phones. It can also refer to written messages.

As a parent, it is important to understand the risks so that you can talk to your child about how to stay safe and what to do if they ever feel scared or uncomfortable.

'Sexting' is often seen as flirting by children and young people who feel that it's a part of normal life.

Young people may also call it Cybersex or sending a nudie, picture or selfie.

How common is sexting

'Sexting' is more common than you may think and has been found to be commonplace amongst children and young people.

There was a 28% increase in calls to ChildLine in 2012/13 that mentioned 'sexting' than in 2011/12 - nearly one every day.

Most young people do not see 'sexting' as a problem and are reluctant to talk to adults about it because they are afraid of being judged or having their phones taken away.

What are the dangers of sexting?

Young people may see 'sexting' as harmless activity but there are risks. Taking, sharing or receiving an image, even voluntarily, can have a long-lasting negative impact.

- It may be common but 'sexting' is illegal. By sending an explicit image a young person is producing and distributing child abuse images and risks being prosecuted, even if the picture is taken and shared with their permission.
- It's easy to send a photo or message but the sender has no control about how it's passed on.
- When images are stored or shared online they become public. They can be deleted on social media or may only last a few seconds on apps like Snapchat, but images can still be saved or copied by others.

- These images may never be completely removed and could be found in the future, for example when applying for jobs or university.
- An offender may threaten to share the pictures with the child's family and friends unless the child sends money or more images.
- If images are shared with their peers or in school, the child may be bullied.
- Images posted online can attract the attention of sex offenders, who know how to search for, collect and modify images.
- Children can feel embarrassed and humiliated. If they are very distressed this could lead to suicide or self-harm.

How to talk to your child about sexting

It may feel awkward but, as a parent, it's important to explain to your child the risks of 'sexting', how to stay safe and that they can talk to you if something ever makes them feel scared or uncomfortable.

You know your child best and your approach should be based on your child and your parenting style.

- Tell your child what can happen when things go wrong. Don't accuse your child of 'sexting', but do explain the dangers.
- Let your child know that you are always there for support if they feel pressured by anyone.
- When you give your child their first mobile phone, outline your expectations and explain the rules of having the phone
- Monitor how younger children can use their phone, e.g. set up controls so that only you can authorise the apps that your child downloads.
- Ask them if they would want something private shown to the world. Explain that photos are easy to forward and can be copied. Ask if they would be happy for you or their grandparents to see that photo. If the answer is 'no', explain that the image or message is probably not appropriate to send
- Make sure your child is comfortable saying no, that they know their body is private and that being asked to 'sext' is inappropriate
- Talk about whether your child thinks that the person who sends a request is likely to be asking other people to do the same
- You may find it easiest to use real-life examples, such as television programmes or news stories, to help you explain the risks

What to do if your child has been affected by sexting

If you find out that your child has been 'sexting' they are likely to be anxious about talking to you.

Where possible give yourself time to process this information and remember your child will be closely watching your reactions.

- Try to remain calm and supportive: Try not to shout or make your child feel like it is their fault
- Reassure your child that they are not alone
- Listen and offer support - If there is a problem your child will be feeling bad and needs your help, support and advice, not criticism
- Don't ask questions like "why have you done it", as your child will feel embarrassed and guilty
- Ask your child what they want to happen. This will depend on the situation but: Take immediate action where possible. Discuss the best course of action for the long term

- Agree a set of actions to address the issue, e.g. reporting the abuse or getting counselling
- If you have a trusted friend it may be helpful to discuss this with them

Other steps you can take to help keep your child safe

The most important way to keep your child safe is to discuss the dangers of 'sexting' and to be supportive if problems do occur.

You can also set up parental controls on your child's phone to block access to certain sites or monitor your child's activities. Find out more about what controls are available:

ChildLine has also produced a free app for young people which is designed to provide them with witty images to send in response to a request for explicit images, and advice on how to stay safe.

ChildLine has partnered with the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) to help young people remove images online.

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobilesafety/sexting/zipit-app/>

