



KEEPING YOUNG CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE

Children love using technology and are learning to navigate websites, online games and consoles, and touch screen technology like iPads and smartphones from a younger and younger age.



Latest Ofcom research has shown that 91% of 5-15 year olds live in a household with internet access and over a third of all 3-4 year olds are now accessing the internet in their homes. We know that children need support in these environments, to get the best out of using the internet, and there are real advantages in making sure that children are supported in their internet use right from the start.



These eight frequently asked questions will provide you with useful information and tips that you can put into place at home, to help keep your youngest children safe online.



Where do I start?

The best way to keep your family safe online, and to understand your children's internet use, is to use the internet together. Active engagement and conversations with your children are key. Be positive and embrace the technologies that young children enjoy and look for family activities or games. Take time to explore the games and services that your children are using, or want to use, and look out for any safety features that may be available. This will give you a better understanding of the different ways that children are engaging with technology and help you to feel more confident.

Should I set any rules?

In the same way that you set rules for most areas of your children's lives, establish your expectations regarding online activities. Creating a family agreement is a useful step, which might include time spent online, sites that can be visited, and behaviour expected; remember, what's right and wrong offline is also right and wrong online. It's a great idea to agree these rules from the outset, so that you and your children are aware of their boundaries.



How can I supervise my child?

Placing your computer or laptop in a busy part of the house e.g. the living room or kitchen can be helpful. This can make it easier for you to be involved in their technology use. But remember, the internet can be accessed from a number of portable devices, for example smartphones, iPod Touch, games consoles and tablets. Portable devices may allow you to ensure your children are using them where you can see them and your children can still be supervised. To find out more about the internet capabilities of smartphones, gaming consoles and other devices, check out our Parents' Guide to Technology.

How much time is too much time?

Children can be enthusiastic users of technology. The challenge can be to harness this enthusiasm and ensure a balance, so that the use of technology does not negatively impact on other important areas of young children's lives. There are some strategies that can be used to help manage the time online issue, such as agreeing time limits or using time limiting tools, designating weekly times to use the internet together, or removing portable devices from your child's bedroom at night to avoid tiredness.



Are there tools to help?

There are free parental controls and filters available, to help you set safer boundaries for your children, but you will usually be required to set them up. Your internet service provider (such as BT or TalkTalk) will provide free filters to help block age inappropriate content for children, and on the UK Safer Internet Centre website you can watch video tutorials that show you how to find and set these up. All mobile phone operators (such as O2 or Vodafone) also provide such parental controls for free. The websites of device manufacturers (such as games consoles) should also outline the controls to which you have access.

Filtering options can be found within websites and services themselves, for example on YouTube or 'safe search' settings can be applied to search engines such as Google or Bing. There are even some search services designed for children (such as Yahoo! Kids). Parental controls can be password protected, so it's advisable to choose a strong password and not share it. Parental controls and filters are a good starting point but it is important to recognise that they are not 100% effective. They are a great help, but not a solution, and work best in combination with parental supervision and engagement, to help your children understand how to stay safe online. As children grow and develop, so do their online needs, therefore you may want to periodically review your parental controls to accommodate this.

What advice can I give my child?

Education is the best tool that a child can have, so discuss with your child the importance of telling an adult immediately if someone, or something, upsets them online. Make sure that your children know that they can come and talk to you (without necessarily getting into trouble) if they see anything that worries them on the internet, and encourage them to feel confident enough to do so. Other immediate strategies to deal with unwanted content or contact could include; switch the screen off, close the laptop, exit the website, or turn the iPad or phone over and put it down.

Younger users may be distracted by advertising and pop ups and with just a couple of clicks, or a spelling mistake, may find themselves on a different website. Children are naturally curious and will innately push boundaries. Bookmarking sites or creating a 'favourites' list is a simple way to help your children find the content they want without having to search the internet for it. It is also important whilst beginning to explore the internet that your child realises that other internet users may not be who they say they are and that 'friends' made online are still strangers, so personal information should be kept safe, including their name, address, phone numbers and passwords etc. Encourage the use of screen names and nicknames where possible. This is where a family agreement can be incredibly useful, to establish rules and good online behaviour in advance.



What games are okay for my child to play?

There are many different online games and playing experiences currently available to children e.g. via computers, consoles, internet games and apps. Gaming may be the very first way that your child encounters life online. Some games however are for adults or older audiences and contain images and language that are not suitable for children. Therefore it is important that the games your children play are the correct age rating. Like film classifications, these ratings are determined by the game's content, and all video games sold in the UK are clearly marked with age ratings set by PEGI (Pan European Games Information). Some online games may also be age rated or be classified 'PEGI OK.'

Many games allow children to play with other internet users and may have chat features enabled. Some games provide a "safe chat mode" where simple predetermined phrases can be used. Playing these games yourself can be fun and will also enable you to identify the safety features provided, such as reporting to a moderator. Reading online reviews of games can be a really useful way to hear other parents' experiences and feedback, and highlight potential safety issues like whether 'in-app' adverts are present, and whether the adverts displayed are suitable for the audience for which the app is intended. There have been news stories of young children running up large bills by inadvertently making 'in-app' purchases whilst playing, so do look out for whether you can spend real money during the game; it should be in the app description in the app store. You can also disable 'in-app' purchasing on a number of devices within the settings.

Where can I report?

Reports can be made to websites through safety/help centres and moderation services. If you are suspicious about the behaviour of others online, reports can be made to CEOP and inappropriate media content, online and offline can be reported via Parentport. Criminal content online can also be reported to the IWF. For more information regarding reporting, visit our Need Help? section on the Childnet website.



Useful Links:

www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/need-help
www.saferinternet.org.uk/parent-tech
www.saferinternet.org.uk/parental-controls
www.ceop.police.uk
www.parentport.org.uk
www.iwf.org.uk
www.pegi.info

