

Queen's Park Trust

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Cyber Safety for our Children

Online safety	1
Preventing online harm and abuse	1
Talking to children about online safety.....	2
Talking to children about staying safe online	2
What is livestreaming?	6
Why do young people livestream?	6
What are the risks of livestreaming?.....	6
What are the main livestreaming platforms?.....	9
Types of inappropriate or explicit content	10
Hoaxes.....	12
Scams	13
Online challenges	13
Look at a range of resources	14
Reporting hoaxes, scams and online challenges.....	14
Harmful content disguised as support	18
Eating disorder content.....	18
Pro-suicide and self-harm content	18
Harmful content linked to mental health condition	18
Positive online content.....	19
Further support.....	20
Hateful content	22
Online Games	23
What are online games?	23

Online games: features, age ratings, risks and tips	24
Roblox.....	24
Minecraft	25
What are the risks of online gaming?.....	27
Tips for keeping children safe while gaming online	28
Deciding if a game is appropriate	29
Parental Controls	31
Deciding what's appropriate for children to see online	31
What are parental controls?.....	31
Home broadband and WiFi	31
Games consoles	31
Mobiles, tablets and computers	32
Apps and online services	32
Search engines.....	33
WiFi and being away from home	33
The limits of parental controls.....	33
Supporting children at different ages with their use of technology.....	34
Frequently asked questions from parents and carers.....	36
Internet connected devices	37
What are internet connected devices?	38
Types of internet connected devices.....	38
What are the risks of internet connected devices?	38
Tips for keeping your family safe	39
Reporting online safety concerns	39
What to do when you see online abuse or inappropriate content	40
Dealing with different safety concerns.....	40
Supporting your child through compulsive device use.....	42
What does compulsion look like?	43
Screen time and screen use	43

Balance and purpose.....	44
Setting healthy boundaries as a family	44
Questions and answers about tech use	45
<i>Virtual private networks and online safety</i>	45
What is a VPN?.....	46
What children may access with a VPN	47
Conversation starters: younger children.....	47
Seven top tips for parents	47
Conversation starters: older children.....	48
VPN safety checklist for parents and carers.....	49
<i>Children, phones and online safety</i>	49
Is my child ready for a phone?	49
Why do some families choose to give their child a phone?.....	50
What are the risks and how do I manage them?.....	50
Questions and answers about children and phones	51
Six top tips to help you manage the risks.....	51
<i>Helping children stay safe on social media.....</i>	52
What children say about using social media.....	53
Understanding risks.....	53
Five tips to help children stay safe:.....	54
Support positive online experiences	54
Understanding social media terms	54
Platform-specific safety hubs for parents and carers	55
<i>Chat apps.....</i>	57
What are chat apps?	57
WhatsApp features, risks, safeguards and tips	58
Discord features, risks, safeguards and tips(Tab content expanded)	59
End-to-end encryption	61
Randomised chat forums and apps.....	62

Disappearing messages.....	62
Gaming chats	63
Chat rooms.....	63
Talk to your child about what they're sharing	64
<i>Talking to children about AI.....</i>	64
What is AI?	64
Opportunities for creativity and learning with AI	65
What are the potential risks of AI for children?	65
Eight practical ways parents and carers can support children.....	66
<i>Virtual private networks and online safety</i>	68
What is a VPN?.....	68
What children may access with a VPN	69
Conversation starters: younger children.....	69
Seven top tips for parents	69
VPN safety checklist for parents and carers.....	70
<i>Online harms: protecting children.....</i>	71
What is online harm?	71
How are children exposed to online harm?	71
The impact of online harms	72
How can we prevent online content from causing further harm?.....	72
Responding to online abuse	73
Recognising the signs of online abuse	74
Vulnerability factors	75
Risks assessing online platforms	76
Barriers to disclosing online abuse.....	76
<i>Online harms: protecting children and young people.....</i>	76
What is online harm?	77
How are children exposed to online harm?	77
The impact of online harms	77

How can we prevent children and young people experiencing online harm?.....	78
How can we support children and young people who have experienced online harm?	78
How can we prevent online content from causing further harm?.....	79
Training to help keep children safe from online harms	79
<i>Social media, online communities and safeguarding</i>	79
What are online communities?	80
Are social media and online communities different?	80
<i>Grooming: recognising the signs</i>	80
What is grooming?	80
Recognising that a child is being groomed	81
Which signs should I look out for?	81
Grooming behaviours.....	82
Online grooming.....	83
Speaking out about grooming.....	84
What makes children more vulnerable to grooming?	85
Protecting children	85
Empowering children	86
<i>Safeguarding, sexting and sharing nudes</i>	86
<i>Protecting children from bullying and cyberbullying</i>	87
Cyberbullying/online bullying:	87
Who is involved?	89
Vulnerability factors	89
Signs and indicators	90
Reporting.....	90
<i>Preventing online harm and abuse.....</i>	91
Other people children can talk to	92

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Cyber Safety for our Children

This document was put together using information from NSPCC and Childline

Online safety

Every child deserves to be, and feel, safe online.

The online world creates many opportunities for children and young people, providing a place where they can communicate, learn and play. But there are also risks.

So, it's important that everyone working and volunteering with children and young people has the confidence and skills to help keep them safe online.

Preventing online harm and abuse

Technology is an integral part of children's and young people's lives. It has transformed the way they learn, play, connect and communicate.

But these opportunities don't come without risk. Children and young people may experience abuse online and they may be exposed to harmful content. And this can have a long-lasting impact on their wellbeing.

Every child deserves to be, and to feel, safe online. And we can all play a role in helping make online spaces safer for children and young people by:

- talking to children and young people about anything worrying they experience online
- recognising how important the online world is to children and young people, and talk to them about it
- making sure online safety is an ongoing part of your work with children and young people, not just a one-off session
- setting rules for the use of online platforms in your organisation. Involve children and young people in setting these and make sure they're well understood
- using technical solutions to manage access to online platforms and make sure everyone knows about and understands why you've put them in place
- helping children and young people understand and manage their privacy settings online.
- making sure its age appropriate

- identifying potential risks
- thinking about any contextual safeguarding issues
- ensuring adequate safety and privacy settings are available

Talking to children about online safety

You can help children and young people learn how to keep safe online by talking to them about:

- how to use the internet and technology in a safe and responsible way
- how to behave appropriately online
- what to do if they're worried about something they experience, online.

Children and young people today often see their online and offline lives as one and the same.

As technology evolves quickly, it can be hard to keep up – but regular, open conversations make a big difference.

There will be times when children need advice or support, especially when navigating the online world. They might come across harmful content or be contacted by someone they don't know, which can be confusing or upsetting.

As a parent or carer, it's important to step in when you feel they need a nudge in the right direction. Whether it's about what they're sharing, who they're speaking to, or how they're feeling online, consistent conversations help build trust and confidence.

Talking to children about staying safe online

1. Start with the positives

Being online can be a great way for children to learn, be creative, and stay connected with friends and family. Recognising these benefits helps keep conversations balanced and encourages confident, safe use of technology.

2. Find the right time and place

Choose a calm moment to talk, such as during a walk, car journey, or shared activity. Avoid starting the conversation when emotions are high or during a disagreement.

3. Use child-facing resources and advice

Support your conversation with age-appropriate tools, videos, or guides. These can help children understand key messages and make the discussion more engaging and relevant to their stage of development.

4. Ask about their experiences

Use open questions like:

- ‘Have you seen anything online that made you uncomfortable?’
- ‘Who do you chat with online?’
- ‘Are they people you know offline?’
- ‘How do you feel when using certain apps or games?’

5. Make it part of everyday life

These chats don’t need to be formal or one-off. Regular, relaxed conversations help children feel supported and more likely to speak up if something worries them.

My child is very young – how can I talk to them about online safety?

Use age-appropriate tools like **Talk PANTS**, **Techosaurus**, or **LEGO’s Build & Talk activities** to make online safety engaging and easy to understand. Keep language clear, avoid jargon, and reassure children they can talk to you about anything.

Help them build healthy habits from a young age, such as thinking before sharing, asking for help when unsure, and taking breaks from screens. If something has gone wrong, stay calm and focus on support, not blame. This helps children feel safe coming to you, no matter what’s happened.

My teen doesn’t want to talk to me, what can I do?

Regular, relaxed conversations help build trust. Respect your child’s privacy and use tech to connect – sometimes a quick text feels less intense than a face-to-face chat. Ask how social media makes them feel and talk together about boundaries that feel fair and supportive.

Avoid framing technology as 'bad' or banning it altogether as young people often say this feels like a punishment or that adults don’t understand their world. Instead, focus on helping them use it safely and responsibly. Let them know they can always come to you, and suggest other trusted adults they can talk to, like a family member, teacher, or **Childline**.

This conversation feels like it is going to be tough, what should I do?

It’s completely normal to feel anxious or uneasy. Conversations about online safety, upsetting content or risky behaviour can be emotionally difficult and complex.

But you don’t need to have all the answers or be an expert.

What matters most is your presence and your willingness to listen. Start by choosing a moment when things feel calm – maybe during a walk, a car ride, or even over dinner.

If face-to-face feels too intense, consider talking via text or messages as this may ease the pressure.

Let your child know you're there to support, not judge. Being curious, open, and calm helps create a safe space where they feel heard and respected.

I know my child won't listen to me when I tell them the rules that I want them to follow, what should I do?

It's common for children to push back against rules, especially if they feel they're being told what to do without being understood.

One of the most effective ways to guide them is by showing, not just telling. Children often learn more from what we do than what we say, so modelling healthy digital habits, like taking breaks from screens, being kind online, and thinking before sharing, can have a big impact.

Rather than banning technology or focusing only on what they shouldn't do, try involving them in setting boundaries together. This helps them feel heard and more likely to stick to the rules. It also avoids making technology feel like the enemy – something many young people say makes them feel misunderstood or punished.

Modelling healthy digital habits is one of the most powerful ways to guide them. This includes:

- Respecting privacy: Keep your own passwords secure and ask before sharing photos of others
- Taking breaks: Show that it's okay to step away from screens and prioritise offline time
- Being mindful online: Avoid oversharing and demonstrate how to engage respectfully in digital spaces

When you model these behaviours, it becomes easier to talk about them. You're not just telling your child what's right – you're showing them.

What if I don't know how to respond?

That's perfectly okay. You're not expected to have all the answers, especially when dealing with complex or unfamiliar situations. What matters most is that your child feels heard and supported.

Start by listening without interrupting. Ask open-ended questions like, 'How did that make you feel?' or 'What do you think we should do next?' If you're unsure, be honest - say something like, 'I'm not sure, but let's figure it out together.' You can explore trusted resources like [Childline's online safety hub](#) together.

If you're unsure how to respond, you don't have to figure it out on your own. You can contact the [NSPCC Helpline](#) for confidential advice and support, or speak to your child's school, which may be able to offer guidance or connect you with further resources.

What if I say the wrong thing?

It's natural to worry about saying the wrong thing, especially when emotions are high. But silence can be more harmful than an imperfect conversation. If you say something that doesn't land well, you can always revisit it later.

You don't need to cover everything in one conversation - sometimes it works better to keep things ongoing and revisit topics over time. This helps children absorb information gradually and makes it easier to talk openly as new situations come up.

Focus on being calm, open, and non-judgmental. Avoid reacting with anger or panic - instead, validate their feelings and reassure them that you're there to help. You might say, "I didn't mean to upset you, I just want to understand and support you."

Building trust takes time and showing that you're willing to learn and grow together is incredibly powerful.

What if my child has seen something upsetting or is involved in risky behaviour?

This can be one of the hardest situations to navigate, but your response can make a huge difference. Start by choosing a calm moment - not when emotions are running high. If it's too difficult to talk in person, consider starting with a message or note to open the door.

If your child shares something upsetting, focus first on helping them feel safe and reducing the risk of further harm. Say something like, 'I'm really sorry you had to see that - I'm here to help you through it.' Reassure them they're not in trouble, and that you'll work together to find a solution.

If they've broken family rules around technology use, revisit those together when the time is right. Explore why it happened, whether the rules still feel fair and relevant, and what might help them stick to them in future. This approach helps children feel heard and supported, rather than blamed.

Depending on the situation, you might need to:

- report harmful content or block users
- seek professional support if the issue is serious or ongoing
- set boundaries together around screen time or app usage.

The key is to approach the situation with empathy and collaboration, not control.

How might my child feel about talking about things they see or do online?

They may feel a mix of emotions:

- embarrassed or ashamed about what they have experienced
- confused or anxious about what might happen next
- worried about your reaction or getting into trouble

- happy or validated by likes and comments.

Let them know all feelings are valid and they can talk to you anytime.

Tips if you're worried:

- stay calm and open
- ask what they enjoy and what worries them online
- involve them in decisions about app use and safety.

What is livestreaming?

Livestreaming is broadcasting to an audience in 'real time'. The audience can leave comments, give likes to the person who is streaming and, in some cases, 'gift' the streamer. Some platforms let several people livestream at the same time.

Children and teenagers are likely to have spent more time on livestreaming and video apps in the last few years. While many children will be using these apps to talk to friends or family, some children may be talking to people they don't know or sharing personal information without realising. We've got advice to help you understand the risks and keep them safe.

Why do young people livestream?

Young people and children like to livestream and use video apps for lots of reasons. These include:

- learning or show others how to do something; livestreams of people playing video games are particularly popular
- staying in contact with family and friends
- taking part in viral trends, such as challenges
- being creative or as a means of self-expression
- relaxing – many video apps have 'satisfying content', such food being prepared or ASMR
- entertainment – there is lots of funny content, or linked to hobbies or trends

What are the risks of livestreaming?

As with most things children do, there can be negatives as well as positives, which includes risks to the safety or wellbeing of children. The risks can be different depending on whether a young person is **hosting** or **watching** livestreams.

Risks of hosting a livestream

Feeling pressured

Because livestreaming and video chat happens in real time, young people may feel under pressure to behave in a certain way so that people will keep watching their channel. It can help to talk to your child about what is and what isn't appropriate behaviour online.

Feeling less inhibited online

Being behind a screen and a feeling of anonymity may result in children feeling less inhibited or shy. They might end up sharing personal and private information or acting in a way that they wouldn't act in the real world in front of people.

Talk to your child about this and give them examples of things they shouldn't be sharing, such as age, location, date of birth, telephone number etc. You can help by:

- reminding your child not to share any personal information online, like where they live or go to school. Remember to explain that where they're livestreaming could give this information away
- making sure their location settings are switched off, so that they're not able to share their location with anyone
- talking to your child about the things that they can safely share, like their interests and hobbies.

Talking to strangers online

- Many websites and social media apps, including video and livestreaming apps, allow unknown people to talk to children and vice versa. It's useful to explore the different sites and apps that your children like to use and check the features, such as privacy and reporting/blocking tools.
- Explore the features together and make sure their 'friends' are real friends who they actually know. If your child is receiving sexual or grooming contact, you can report this to CEOP.

Bullying comments

- Many apps allow for comments. Your child may feel upset or embarrassed if they've received inappropriate comments from others. It's important that you talk with your child about any features (or lack of) within an app before allowing them to share video content or going live.
- You can look for settings that enable comments to be turned off and how to report content.

Videos being recorded or shared without consent

Conversations and livestreams can be recorded and shared across other social networks, without knowledge or consent. Your child may lose control over their video and where it's been shared.

Some service providers can be contacted and the content taken down, but others will only remove if the content is illegal or violates their terms and conditions. It is important that your child is aware of this so that they can moderate what they are sharing or doing.

- Reassure them and offer support – remind them they can always talk to you, another trusted adult, or [Childline](#).
- Don't blame your child. Try avoiding questions like "Why have you done this?" which might stop your child opening up to you.

Worried about how to support a young person who has had a sexual image or video of themselves shared online?

If they're under 18, they can use Childline and the Internet Watch Foundation's discreet [Report Remove tool](#) to see if it can be taken down. Young people can get support from Childline throughout the process.

Risks of watching a livestream

Seeing inappropriate or upsetting content

Many sites and apps have no or very poor age verification processes, meaning there is a risk your child may see upsetting or inappropriate content, such as sexual, abusive, violent content. This can result in a range of emotions such as worry, anxiety, and confusion.

It's important to let them know that they can always come to you or a trusted adult if they see something upsetting such as inappropriate or explicit content and also explore the features available to block or report inappropriate content. Sometimes your child may not wish to talk to someone they know about this, let them know they can always call Childline on [0808 1111](#).

You can help by:

- learning how to support your child if they see inappropriate content online
- reporting any sexual images or videos to CEOP
- setting up parental controls in your home.

Inappropriate or upsetting comments

Comments on livestreams aren't moderated and can include content that would be upsetting to both the person livestreaming and anyone else reading the comments.

Look at the reporting options on the platform and make sure your child knows how to report inappropriate or upsetting comments.

Tips to help keep your child safe

- **Talk to your child** - Talk to them about what they're doing online and how to stay safe. Let them know they can come to you, or another adult they trust, if they feel worried or upset by anything they've seen online.
- **Explore apps and sites together** - Explore what your child likes to do online together. This can help you to understand why they're using certain apps and sites. Explore the features that are available, which would include privacy settings, location settings, and how to block and report.
- **Agree what's appropriate together** - Agree your own rules as a family when using apps, sites or games.
- **Check your settings** - Check the technology your family uses and use privacy and location settings to keep your child safe. You can call your mobile and broadband provider to find out how to do this.

What are the main livestreaming platforms?

There are specific livestreaming apps such as Twitch and Yubo, but young people can livestream on other platforms including Facebook and Instagram. There is also video chat in groups or one-to-one using apps like WhatsApp.

During lockdown children and young people also became more familiar with conferencing apps such as Zoom.

Twitch - Age rating: 13+

Main features: Popular with gamers, Twitch is a live streaming site and app for users 13+ that lets you stream live gameplay for others to watch and comment on in real time.

Bigo - Age rating: 18+

Main features: Used for livestreaming with others around the world. You can also interact with people nearby and the app openly promotes contact with strangers.

Monkey - Age rating: 18+

Main features: Monkey uses live streaming (video chat) to randomly connect you with other users. The design of the app is very child-like yet it is designed for adults.

Clash - Age rating: 13+

Main features: Which is a video sharing app that lets you shoot, upload and share 15 second videos. Anybody can comment on videos, and all videos can be downloaded by others.

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/livestreaming-online-video-apps/>

Types of inappropriate or explicit content

As children start to explore the internet, they may come across content that isn't suitable for their age, or that may upset or worry them. We've got lots of advice to help you and your child if they have seen explicit or harmful content. This page includes resources for supporting children and understanding how they might feel if they see upsetting content.

We also have pages about how to identify and deal with different types of inappropriate and explicit content.

Understanding how your child may feel

Children may experience lots of different emotions when they see inappropriate, upsetting or distressing content online. It's important to talk to your child about what they're doing online and let them know to come to you if they see anything that upsets them.

Children who see inappropriate content might feel:

- confusion or uncertainty
- shame or guilt
- shock or disgust
- sadness
- excitement or happiness.

How filters and editing tools can affect young people

Many platforms now have in-app filters or editing tools to help you alter an image or video. Some filters can be used for fun, to add silly props or masks to an image or video.

However, when filters or tools are used to enhance or alter physical features, this can lead young people to compare themselves to others online and have an unrealistic view of acceptable beauty standards. It's not always easy to recognise when someone is using a filter, for example there are tools available that enable you to edit your appearance during a livestream or video call.

What impact can filters and editing tools have?

- They can affect young people's self-esteem and body image.

- Young people may feel pressure to post certain images to 'fit in'.
- They can affect young people's overall wellbeing.
- Young people may feel disappointment or embarrassment if they don't get enough 'likes' or comments.
- Seeing a friend, influencer or celebrity posting an edited image or video online can also negatively affect a young person's self-esteem and put pressure on them to post certain types of images.

Remember: Often people will only share certain aspects of their lives which can lead followers to believe that they live a perfect life. Many influencers are paid to create aspiring content as a way to encourage people to buy products and make money.

Supporting your child with what they see and share

The content we see on our social media feeds can have an impact on us but we don't need to keep following things that impact negatively on our wellbeing. Help them take control of what they are seeing online by encouraging them to do the following:

- Talk to them about editing tools, where they see them and how they make them feel.
- Remind them that what we see online is often a highlights reel. This can even be the case when someone is sharing something sad. We don't see the day-to-day realities of people's lives online.
- Explore options to mute or unfollow accounts.
- Encourage them to regularly review their feed and unfollow anyone who doesn't make them feel good about themselves.
- Explore tools that hide likes from other accounts and look for other ways you can help build their self-confidence.
- Remind them that they can always come to you if they're feeling low or worried about something and they can also contact Childline.

Mental health resources on Childline

Childline has lots of resources, advice and activities to help young people manage their mental health:

- [Calm Zone](#) is full of lots of tips and exercises for them to do when they are feeling overwhelmed or upset
- [Taking care of your mental health](#)
- [Advice and support about their body](#) from staying healthy to building confidence, and advice on eating disorders
- [Coping with stress](#).

What's real and what's false online?

- Digital platforms have made it easier for anyone to share information online, and it can be difficult to determine whether something is real or false.
- What a young person sees online can shape how they view the world and impact their overall wellbeing. It's important to talk to them about how misinformation spreads and how to look out for it.
- What do we mean by misinformation and disinformation?
- False information that is spread online is known as misinformation or disinformation. These are most commonly referred to as 'fake news' or 'hoaxes'.
- **Misinformation** is where false information is shared by accident without the intent to cause harm. For example, sharing inaccurate photos, quotes or dates online because you believe them to be true.
- **Disinformation** is false information shared deliberately to mislead and cause harm. For example, fabricated news stories and political propaganda.
- Examples of misinformation and disinformation

Hoaxes

A hoax is an example of disinformation. It is where someone deliberately shares false information to trick someone into believing something that isn't true.

Hoaxes can come in different forms, for example it could be a fake news story or a message

- **Fabricated or false news stories** about current news that might make a child feel worried or scared about what's happening in the world. This is commonly known as 'fake news'.
- **Viral messages** containing false information can easily be shared on messaging apps like WhatsApp and Messenger. If you or your child know the person who has shared it, you might be more likely to believe it.
- **Deep fakes** are videos where people's faces are edited to make it look like they said or did something they didn't.
- **Memes** can be used to spread unverified facts.

Hoaxes can be spread quickly as it's not always easy to spot when something contains false information. People might read something they believe to be true and then go on to share it with others.

If you see something that concerns or confuses you, it's important to not share it further as this can help draw more attention to them. Instead report to the app, game or site that you've seen it on.

Scams

An online scam is where criminals use online platforms to trick someone into sharing personal information like account logins or bank details. Scams can happen on any online platform.

- **Phishing emails or messages** sent to a personal device asking you to provide personal information or contain blackmail demands. Sometimes these will be made to look like they're from credible organisations or businesses.
- **Promotion of products or false adverts that contain untrue claims.** For example, a fake competition or a product that claims to do something it can't to encourage others to purchase it.
- **Catfishing** where some will pretend to be someone else to trick them into doing something.
- **Competitions or quizzes** where you are led to believe there is a prize.
- **Identity theft** where people are tricked into sharing personal information to help them hack other accounts.

Online challenges

An online challenge is an online activity that normally involves sharing an image or video of yourself doing a set task. They can take place on most online platforms but are most commonly on video sharing platforms like TikTok or YouTube.

Some online challenges can be fun for young people to participate in. For example, challenges that involve dancing or those that help raise money for charity. However, online challenges can become risky when they contain dangerous stunts or activities that could cause physical or psychological harm to a young person or others. Video creators can easily edit videos to make it look they did something dangerous or risky when in reality they didn't.

Challenges aren't always activity based and can encourage young people to share personal or stories about themselves which could upset them and others.

Young people might feel more pressure to take part in a challenge if their friend or someone they follow online, such as an influencer or celebrity has participated. Challenges can also go viral and be seen as harmless fun, both of which can entice young people to take part.

How does it spread?

Misinformation and disinformation can spread on most online platforms that have communication tools. This includes social media and video-sharing platforms, games, forums, comment sections, email and messaging apps.

How to spot misinformation online

It's important to remind your child that not everything they see online is real and encourage them to always check before they share. Here are some things you should encourage them to do:

Don't share if you aren't sure

If your child sees something online that worries or upsets them encourage them to not share. Remind them they can speak to you, another trusted adult, or a Childline counsellor if they have questions about something they've seen.

If they come to you, and you aren't sure, you could try speaking to your child's teacher.

Do your own research

Always check the source and the date of the information. Does it come from a reputable organisation that they've heard of? Could the image or video have been edited? Encourage them to check different sources like other news or fact-checking websites such as Full-fact or Snopes and compare information.

Also think about whether it conflicts with your own knowledge of the topic.

Don't take part in risky challenges

Remind them to never take part in a challenge that involves stunts or that could cause them or others physical or emotional harm.

Talk to them regularly

Having regular conversations with them about what they're doing online can help to open up the conversation about what is and isn't real online. Try asking them about some of the challenges they take part in with their friends or ask them to show you their favourite online challenge.

Look at a range of resources

Often online platforms will show us content based on what we like. Try to encourage your child to look at a range of different resources to learn and access new information.

Reporting hoaxes, scams and online challenges

If you or your child comes across a hoax, scam or risky online challenge you should report it directly to the platform to try and get it removed. Find more information on reporting here.

If you or your child has been scammed online you should report it to [Action Fraud](#).

It can be hard to know how to talk to your child about the risks of watching online porn. Our advice can help you explain the risks to your child, prevent them from watching it, and know what to do if your child has explicit or upsetting content online.

Why children watch it

It's normal for young people to be curious about sex and relationships and sometimes they may search online for information or answers to questions they have. They may also do this if they're worried or embarrassed about asking their parents or guardians.

Some of the reasons children and young people watch or search for this content include:

- to learn about sex and sexual identity
- for sexual arousal and pleasure
- out of curiosity
- for "a laugh"
- to break the rules
- to be disgusted
- to "freak out" their friends
- because of peer or relationship pressure.

Website pop-ups

Sometimes children may discover sexually explicit content online accidentally by clicking on website pop-ups or misleading links. Setting up parental controls on your child's online devices can help prevent this.

What are the risks for children?

Children and young people watching this content are at greater risk of developing:

- unrealistic attitudes about sex and consent
- more negative attitudes about roles and identities in relationships
- unrealistic expectations of body image and performance.

How to protect your child

Change your browser settings

Make sure that any adults viewing pornography on shared devices in your home don't save their passwords or leave themselves logged in. Browser settings may need to be set to prevent passwords being auto filled.

Use parental controls

Have parental controls or filters installed on your home Wi-Fi and make sure that child friendly settings are in place on your children's devices. You can set this up by calling your mobile and broadband providers.

Talk with your child

Use our tips above to help you talk to your child about what they do and see on the internet, and to let them know you're there if they have questions about porn, sex and relationships.

How to talk to your child

It's natural to feel anxious or unsure about talking to your child, but being open and honest can help them to understand the risks and feel more comfortable talking to you if they've seen something that's worried or upset them online.

If you discover that your child has been watching or sharing explicit content online, you might feel a lot of different emotions. These could include feeling disgusted, shocked or like their childhood is slipping away.

But it's really important that you think carefully about how to react. Children watch porn for all sorts of reasons, including by accident, and you need to make sure that they can come to you for help and advice when they need it.

Healthy relationships

Reassure your child that it's natural for them to feel curious about sex and that they can always talk to you if they have questions or concerns. Explain that you understand they may feel worried or embarrassed about talking to you.

Talking to your child about healthy relationships can help them understand the differences between porn and real life. Talk to them about what makes a positive and healthy relationship. Ask them what they think makes a good relationship.

It can help to talk to them about things like consent, personal boundaries and staying safe from sexual abuse. Explain to teenagers that they can talk to you or get support from Childline if they feel pressured into having sex or watching sexually explicit content. This conversation may vary depending on your child's age.

Porn isn't real life

Explain that sex in porn is often different to how people have sex in real life. People in these films are acting and putting on a performance, so things are exaggerated and the lines between consent, pleasure and violence are often blurred. It's important for young people to know the difference between porn and healthy relationships.

Peer pressure

Sometimes children and young people feel pressured to watch or share this content. This pressure can come from their friends, peers or a partner. Explain to your child that while some people watch it, not everyone does and it's definitely not something they have to do.

Let them know it's okay not to want to watch or do something that makes them feel uncomfortable and they should never be pressured or forced into anything. Explain why online porn isn't appropriate for young people and what the risks of watching it are.

About addiction

Some young people worry that they watch too much pornography and might feel like they can't stop viewing it. This can make them feel guilty or ashamed, and they may want help to stop viewing it. Childline has advice on addiction that your child may find helpful.

Is watching or sharing porn against the law?

It isn't illegal for children and young people under 18 to watch this content, but it is against the law to show it to anyone under the age of 16 or give them access to it.

It's also illegal for anyone under 18 to share explicit images or films of themselves or another young person, even if it was shared with their permission. Only the police can decide whether or not to charge a young person with a crime. It's a good idea to speak to them if you're worried.

Worried about how to support a young person who has had a sexual image or video of themselves shared online? If they're under 18, they can use Childline and the Internet Watch Foundation's discreet [Report Remove](#) tool to see if it can be taken down. Young people can get support from Childline throughout the process.

Some types of porn are illegal, even for adults. These are called "extreme pornographic images" and include porn which:

- threatens a person's life or results in serious injury
- shows violence such as rape or abuse
- anything involving children under 18.

Harmful content disguised as support

The internet can be a source of support for many young people who are struggling to cope with worrying or confusing feelings. It can allow them to access information and chat to other people who may be experiencing the same thing.

However, online platforms can also provide them with opportunities to view upsetting and graphic content that could cause them harm, including pro-eating disorder and pro-suicide and self-harm.

Content like this can be viewed on most online platforms including social media, video-sharing platforms and via a website browser. It can be shared further on online forums, message boards and groups that have been set up for people experiencing similar feelings. These types of content can take many forms:

Eating disorder content

Content that promotes eating disorders can come in the form of:

- personal accounts
- diet tips and weight loss tips, which promote harmful and extreme methods which may put someone's health at risk
- images and videos of celebrities or people who have dealt with eating disorders
- memes, videos, images and blog posts
- groups for people experiencing eating disorders to share tips
- news stories.

Pro-suicide and self-harm content

Content that promotes suicide and self-harm can take these forms:

- personal accounts
- images and videos sharing tips about self-harm and suicide, including content that actively promotes it and shares methods
- online communities for people who are experiencing suicidal or self-harm thoughts
- news stories that discuss suicide or self-harm
- memorial pages for people who have died by suicide
- online challenges or hoaxes that may encourage someone to take part in an activity that could cause them harm.

Harmful content linked to mental health condition

Content that promotes harmful messaging about mental health conditions:

- harmful advice and incorrect information about medical conditions disguised as from health professionals
- in-depth stories and sharing of content linked to anxiety and depression
- online communities sharing messages of hopelessness and despair
- stigma about mental health conditions and those who experience them
- personal accounts.

Positive online content

Going online can also play a key part in a young person's recovery. Some online platforms can be a great resource to find encouraging and supportive advice that can help someone who is experiencing bad mental health or an eating disorder. This type of content can come in many different forms but might include:

- support groups
- vlogs or videos where people share recovery progress, tips and advice
- inspirational quotes or memes.

I'm worried that my child may see or have seen this content

- Worrying that your child may see this kind of content or finding that your child has seen this kind of content, can be upsetting for any parent. But there are things you can do to support them and help limit further exposure.
- use parental controls to limit harmful content being accessible on a device
- work with your child to set wellbeing controls such as setting screen time limits for apps or setting a 'bedtime' control for their device to help them take a break.

Tips for supporting your child if they've seen harmful content

- support them to report the content
- discuss how to unfollow accounts that may be posting content
- discuss with your child about safe browsing
- have open and honest conversations tackling difficult topics as often as you can
- use our advice on supporting your child if you think they may be anxious, depressed or suicidal
- access further support services listed below.

How do young people find this content?

You don't have to actively search for something to see it, although some children may do this. Most social media and video sharing platforms use algorithms to show us content based on our interests, so if you've searched for recipes, it will show you more recipes.

Social media algorithms are a way of sorting posts in a users' feed, based on relevancy, instead of publish time. What's taken into account are things like previous interactions, engagements, current trends, and viral content.

Platforms will also test out different types of content with similar themes to see how we interact, so it knows what to show us in the future. For example, someone who is viewing healthy recipe videos on TikTok may be more likely to be served a video promoting exercise.

This can also mean that a child could see more extreme content than they were searching for such as low-calorie restriction rather than generally healthy recipes.

How do children feel seeing this content?

Content that is harmful to one person might not be to another and may depend on how they are feeling in the moment that they see it. This means that a child or young person might not always realise when they have viewed something harmful.

If a young person is already experiencing low self-esteem or worrying thoughts relating to body image or mental health, then coming across more extreme content could negatively impact them without them realising.

They can also search for the content using key words associated with the topic as well as hashtags.

It can be harder for young people to recognise when something could be having a negative impact on their behaviour.

Viewing these types of content online and hearing other people's experiences can make them feel less alone. But after a while it can make how they are feeling much worse, and it's important that they know how they can seek support.

Further support

Eating disorders:

- [Beat](#) has lots of support for young people experiencing eating problems, including a helpline
- [Childline](#) has more advice on the support available for those experiencing eating disorders or other eating problems.

Self-harm and suicide:

- Childline has advice for children having suicidal thoughts and information and tips for dealing with self-harm

- [PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide](#) is a UK charity dedicated to the prevention of suicide and the promotion of positive mental health and emotional wellbeing in young people
- [Purple Suicide Prevention Tool](#) is free browser extension that signposts people who have searched for suicide or self-harm content to mental health support and advice. You should consider adding this extension to any computers your child has access to
- [Samaritans](#) is for anyone who's struggling to cope or who needs someone to listen without judgement or pressure
- The [OLLIE Foundation](#) provides advice on how to talk about suicide.

Distressing online content

Get information about distressing or violent online content, and how to support young people if they see it.

We all want children to have a safe and positive experience when they go online, but sometimes your child might come across things they find uncomfortable or upsetting. This could include violent or distressing content, terror or extremist content, racism, hate speech or bullying.

Where might they see this content?

Wherever children and young people can view or share content, there is a risk that they will see something distressing or worrying.

Many apps and sites have moderators in place to help remove content, however some don't.

Terrorism and extremist behaviour

Young people are likely to get their news online. This does mean that they will see content being shared about distressing events like terror attacks, which can be very hard for them to make sense of.

Hearing about terrorist attacks or bombings can make children very anxious or scared. Sometimes this can include eyewitness videos which can be distressing for anyone to watch. This type of content can be shared very quickly online and may also leave young people with questions or fears about their own or others safety.

We know that the online world is being used to radicalise young people so you should talk to your child to help them question things that they are reading or being told online to enable them to not be influenced in this way.

It's important to talk to your child about what they are seeing online, particularly in the aftermath of events.

Cyberbullying

Bullying is hurtful and exists online just as it does offline. Online it can take many forms such as sharing embarrassing photos, nasty comments, or dislikes. Because kids spend so much time on their devices, if they are being bullied it is hard to escape it.

Cyberbullying can happen in different ways, but some examples might be:

- Sending unkind messages or comments.
- Sharing images or videos of someone without their permission.
- Excluding someone from a group chat or other online activity like gaming.
- Pressuring another person to say or do something that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Setting up groups or accounts to encourage others to be mean to someone else.

Childline has some valuable advice to help your child recognise and deal with cyberbullying.

Hateful content

Hateful content is where others are inciting hatred towards an individual or a group. If the focus of the hateful content is a protected characteristic, then it's a hate crime.

Hate crime is where a person focuses on disability, race or ethnicity, religion or beliefs, sexual orientation or gender identity to abuse another person. Hate crime can happen online as well as offline.

If your child experiences this, they might feel frightened or angry about the abuse. But your child may also see this behaviour directed at other people. You should explain that hate crime is illegal and that it can be reported to the police. Discuss with your child what they can do if they see this happening and explain that they shouldn't ignore it.

Encourage your child to respect other online users and to think before making a comment, sharing an image or sending a message. Sometimes it can be a good idea to wait a little while and think if what you are about to do could hurt someone's feelings.

What should you do if they do see this content?

- **Report it** - Make sure you and your child know where you can report content.
- **Set up parental controls** - Setting up parental controls can help prevent it happening again.

- **Explore in-app settings** - Look for content or age settings on the app to help limit certain types of content.
- **Show them Childline's Calm Zone** - The [Calm Zone](#) has activities to help children feel better when they are feeling anxious, scared or sad.

Online Games

Understand the risks and get advice to help children play online games safely.

Things to consider if your child games online:

- age ratings of games they play
- messaging and contact functions on the games
- in-game purchases
- trolling, grieving and scams
- how to report problems
- where they can get further support.

Also, if you have more than one child in your home, be aware that games suitable for one child to play or watch, may not be suitable for another.

What are online games?

Games can be generally split into different types:

- simple, short games like Candy Crush or Angry Birds
- creative games, solving puzzles or building worlds such as Minecraft
- games that need strategy and skill to play, like chess
- adventure games that explore different worlds and conflicts such as Fortnite or Call of Duty.

Many games can be a combination of types as well as having other features, like the ability to interact and communicate with others. As well as interacting, players can share content, purchase in-game items, create their own games within the game and so much more.

How are online games played?

Children can play games on consoles, apps or websites, mobiles, tablets, PCs, or through smart speakers and virtual reality headsets. They can also chat to other players using messaging platforms for gamers or watch livestreams of well-known gamers.

Gaming has always been a popular activity, particularly with children and young people, but not only are games very different now, so are the devices they're played on, ranging from gaming consoles, PC's, phones, tablets, smart watches, smart speakers, virtual reality headsets and others.

Why do young people play online games?

Games are more accessible than ever before. The huge range of games means there's something for everyone. The reasons why they play online games and which games they play will change over time.

Some reasons include:

- Gaming can be social, when children play together on the same team, or play against each other. There are also location-based games which encourage players to go outside and explore, such as Pokemon Go and Wizards Unite.
- Using social media apps like Discord to connect with others within public and private servers (chat rooms).
- A sense of achievement for competition and advancement and sharing achievements within the game and social media.
- Role playing, exploration or escapism.
- Watching videos on YouTube for tips and tricks, developing their own gaming skills or even creating their own gaming videos.
- Entertainment – games are designed to be entertaining and can be fun and engaging for young people.

Online games: features, age ratings, risks and tips

Roblox

A gaming platform where players can create and publish their own games. The platform can be a great educational tool to help teach children new skills like coding. However, there are also some risks.

On the platform, players can build and publish their own games. This means that other users could build games that contain adult or inappropriate themes that your child might see.

Players can use the communication features of Roblox to talk to one other while they are playing. This means that there is a risk of cyberbullying or unwanted contact.

Roblox does have advice on parental controls, safety and moderation. This includes Community Standards that outline what behaviour is and isn't acceptable on the platform.

Moderators review and remove inappropriate content, and the platform has a range of parental controls and safety settings that can help keep your child safer on the platform. There's also a separate [Roblox families advice section](#).

Is Roblox safe for my child? Tips to minimise the risks

1) Ensure your child signs up with the correct age

As the platform's safety settings and parental controls are enabled according to the child's age, it's important that they sign up with the correct details.

2) Build a list of age-appropriate games

Not all games on the platform will be appropriate for your child. Depending on your child's age, you will be able to build a list of games they can access, so exclude others. You can also switch off in-app spending or let them set monthly limits.

3) Explore communication settings

For children under 13, you can manage who your child can speak to by disabling chat completely or limiting it to friends only. You can also switch off their inbox to stop them receiving direct messages. You can also monitor and restrict their time on the platform.

4) Explore the platform together

Ask your child to give you a demonstration of the platform to help you understand how they use it. If they're under 13, you can explore some of the parental controls together. You could even consider setting up your own account and playing the games yourself – if you have an account, you can adjust parental controls for your child from there.

5) Have regular conversations about gaming

Continue to have regular conversations with them about what they are doing online. Ask your child open questions like 'What games have you been playing on Roblox recently?' or 'What platforms have you been using to play games?'.

Minecraft

An online game where players can build their own environment and communities. Some people refer to it as an 'online LEGO' as you use virtual building blocks to create your own online spaces. These are known on Minecraft as 'Worlds'. The game lets you play alone or with friends.

The platform has public servers that can be accessed by anyone with an account on the platform. All servers have a chat function where players can talk to each other.

Parents and carers can access Minecraft safety settings through a combination of Microsoft account and Xbox privacy and safety settings – more information in the [Minecraft resources for parents and guardians](#).

What are Minecraft Realms?

Minecraft Realms is a subscription service that allows players to set up their own servers. These servers are private and whoever owns the server can invite other players to join.

What's the minimum age to use Minecraft?

Children can access Minecraft through different accounts, including Microsoft and Xbox, [depending on the device and game version](#). All of these accounts have age restrictions. For example, in the UK, they have to be 13 to have a Microsoft account independent of their parents.

You can check age recommendations for Minecraft and other games on the [Pan European Game Information \(PEGI\) website](#).

Is Minecraft safe for my child? Tips to minimise the risks

Setting up parental controls depends on the version of Minecraft, but it's generally through your Microsoft or Xbox account. Minecraft has [resources for families](#) which explain how to set up those safety features.

If your child is under 16 and has a child account, you can link your own account to theirs and modify their settings to help keep them safe.

1) Talking about and controlling chat features

Players can opt to play in single or in multiplayer mode, with multiplayer enabling them to chat to one another – this comes with the risk of being exposed to inappropriate content or language. If you want to, you can turn off both the multiplayer mode and the chat functionality from your own account.

If you don't wish to do this, you could talk to your child about who they are playing with. Tell them that in-game chat should be about the game only. If someone asks them something private, or to message on another app, then they should speak to you or another trusted adult.

2) Protection from inappropriate language

A profanity filter is turned on by default for all Minecraft accounts and can't be turned off for child accounts.

3) Find child-friendly servers

Explore Minecraft before you let your child use it and choose child-friendly servers for them to play on. You could ask friends or family members who have children which servers they use or try searching 'child-friendly servers on Minecraft' for recommendations and reviews.

4) Set time limits

Minecraft can be a very immersive and time-consuming game, so you could try to agree on an amount of time that is acceptable (keep it realistic) that includes regular breaks from the screen.

5) Follow and watch suitable video channels

Many children watch Minecraft videos/tutorials (for ideas on new things to create) on YouTube, or sites like Discord. Some tutorials can include bad language or inappropriate comments. To avoid your child encountering this, encourage them to watch some of the 'best for children' channels – you can find recommendations online.

What are the risks of online gaming?

Being bullied

Children can be bullied for not playing a specific game or feel uncomfortable that they're missing out on something their friends are doing. They may be deliberately excluded from a game by their friends or criticised for how they play. Other players may swear or use abusive language over voice chat, and this can be upsetting for your child.

If your child is experiencing bullying in online games, tell them they can talk to you or contact Childline and show them the blocking and reporting functions in a game, so they can prevent bullies from contacting them.

Trolling, grieving and scams

Griefers are gamers who deliberately try to ruin the game for other players. This can also be called trolling. Players may also try to trick or scam young people into giving up 'skins' or other in-game items by offering them money or by hacking their account.

Skins are a cosmetic feature that let players personalise their character and in-game items, they can be extremely rare and valuable so losing them can be upsetting for a child.

In-game purchases

Some games cost money to download, or players need to buy credits or items so they can keep playing. Many free games are designed to make the player want to continue but need payments to make this possible, which can be very frustrating.

We suggest not storing payment card details on devices or in apps, to prevent charges building up.

Talking to people they don't know

Some games are designed to be played in teams or against other people, and sometimes players can be based in different locations. Young people can easily play with people they don't know and haven't met, communicating using voice, video or text chat.

Young people can also use other platforms, like Discord and Reddit, to learn tips about the games they play and speak to other players with similar interests.

Many popular games have official channels with thousands of members. This puts young people at risk of grooming or online forms of abuse, along with the risk of moving the conversation to other platforms or meeting up offline. You should be aware of this across all online activity.

Tips for keeping children safe while gaming online

If you're not a gamer, all the devices, the features, the interconnectivity with other games and apps can quickly become overwhelming so here are some helpful tips to help keep children safe while gaming online.

Check the game's content

Most games have an age rating based on their themes and those with violent and sexual content will have a higher rating.

[PEGI \(Pan European Game Information\)](#) provides game age ratings for Europe and that can help you to decide if the game is appropriate for your child. These ratings don't include communication features, so a game with a low age rating may let children speak to people they don't know.

Change settings

Some games let players turn off communications features, mute voice chat and report other players who behave inappropriately. Look at the settings available to see what's best for your child.

All major games consoles have settings that prevent children from finding inappropriate games. You can set limits on how long a young person can play and prevent them from speaking to unknown players. It's a good idea to explore these settings before your child plays the game.

Talk to your child regularly

Talk to your child about staying safe online, take an interest in the games they're playing and see if you can play them together and agree which ones are appropriate.

If you're going to set limits on the amount of time a child can spend playing games, make sure these are clear and that you agree them together. You could try agreeing the number of rounds your child plays instead of a length of time.

Take time to play games with your children so that you can understand the features. You can find out if there is anything concerning you need to be aware of, or safety features or parental controls which should be enabled.

Ask why they like playing the game?

- Discuss who they're playing with. Do they know everyone on their contact or friends list? Explain that conversations should only be about the game, and if someone starts asking them other questions or suggests they speak using another app they should tell you or an adult they trust.
- Talk to them about what they're sharing. Use examples that are easy for them to understand, such as "You shouldn't give your number or any other personal information to somebody you don't know on the street. Is somebody online you don't know any different?"
- Discuss in-game purchases with your child. These can be really enticing, it's important to discuss that small amounts of money can add up very quickly. If you do allow your child to purchase items within the game discuss limits or set up their device so that purchases are turned off.

Make a family agreement

Consider creating a Family Agreement to establish some rules, which would include screen time or game-playing time.

Many games take a very long time to play, and not all have regular 'save points'. This can be very frustrating for a child who has spent a long time trying to get to a new level only to be called down for dinner. Give them fair warning, e.g. 20 minutes then 10 minutes.

Complete a [Family Agreement](#) online, or print out to fill in.

Deciding if a game is appropriate

There are four main things that you can consider to help you decide if a game's appropriate for your child to play:

1) Check the content of the game and any chat function

Content within games is regulated and rated into age groups based on elements within the game such as sex, violence, gambling, drugs, in-app purchases etc.

There are lots of different age ratings around the world, such as PEGI used in the UK. Always check the age rating to help you decide to allow your child to download or play a game - this is normally visible next to the game title within gaming and app stores.

2) Consider who your child could have contact with while using the game

Consider any communication channels and if there are settings to turn off or limit chat functions. There can be different types of communications, e.g. group chat or private chat.

Communication in a game can increase the risk of bullying (sometimes referred to as being 'grieved' within gaming), being contacted by people they don't know and potentially groomed or exploited. Many games have a means of communication which includes private messaging and private chat. Look out for:

- words like 'whisper' or 'private' next to messages if your child is playing in multiplayer games (especially if they are playing with people, they don't know offline)
- and any suggestion of taking the conversation to other messaging platforms.

3) Does the game affect your child's behaviour?

Some games may affect your child's behaviour. That could include bullying or 'grieving' others, trolling or other inappropriate behaviour.

Very intensive games can result in short-term bad behaviour such as poor temper or 'rage quitting', which is getting so upset they stop playing immediately. Ensuring a game's suitability can help, as can limiting playing time.

4) Does the game have in-app purchasing?

In-app purchases normally enhance the game or gameplay, for example skins (design of the character or weapon) or loot boxes (treasure chests, but you don't always know what is in them).

There can often be considerable pressure on children to be unique within their games (new skins) or to be better than others (purchasing power-ups). You should consider settings to turn off in-app purchases, or set a spending limit on the device or app.

Children need to be aware of scams involving free in-game currency (e.g. V-Bucks in Fortnite, or Robux in Roblox). Text messages, forum posts and videos may have content advertising free in-game currency. But they're often scams, designed to coax the player into revealing their gamer tag (username) and password in return for currency. This is known as a 'phishing' scam.

Parental Controls

Get advice on setting up parental controls to help keep your child safe online.

Deciding what's appropriate for children to see online

The online world gives us access to a huge amount of information and services, but the scale of information available also means that there is content that is inappropriate for children. What is or isn't appropriate is up to individual parents and carers to decide, and could be based on things like age, ability, beliefs and family values.

What are parental controls?

Parental controls allow you to block and filter upsetting or inappropriate content. They work across your WiFi, phone network, individual apps and devices.

Parental controls can help you to:

- plan what time of day your child can go online and how long for
- create content filters to block apps that may have inappropriate content
- manage the content different family members can see.

Home broadband and WiFi

Home internet providers can offer parental controls for your family. You can:

- use a filter from your internet provider to control the content that you and your family see. Some providers allow different settings for each user
- set up any device connected to your home broadband. How you do this depends on your provider and you'll need to access your home router. You can ask your internet provider for help setting this up. Remember that this only affects your child accessing the internet through the WiFi – if they are using 4G or 5G etc to connect you need to check the settings on their mobile device too (see below).

Games consoles

Most games consoles have internet access, which means your child can go online and chat with other players or make in-game purchases. On many consoles there are parental controls which allow you to manage which features are available to your child. On some devices you can:

- turn off chat functions to stop your child from talking to people they don't know
- restrict games based on age
- turn off in-game purchases or set a limit.

Check the website for the console your child has for a parent's section and details of features. Some games also allow you to change settings for that individual game.

PlayStation Family Management

On PlayStation consoles you can set up a Family Manager account which allows you to manage different accounts for different children/users. Within this you can manage a range of features, such as restricting communication with other players, restricting content, setting play time controls and set spending limits. See all the features available for [PS4](#) and for [PS5](#).

Mobiles, tablets and computers

All mobiles, tablets and computers have parental control settings, which can differ between devices, these include:

- allowing or disallowing in-game or in-app purchases
- settings such as location settings and what information your child is sharing
- wellbeing settings to help with limiting screen time.

You can get more advice about setting up controls on different devices from your mobile provider and the [UK Safer Internet Centre](#).

On Apple devices such as iPhone, iPad, Apple Watch, Apple TV etc. there are features available for parents all tied into an account. You can set content and privacy restrictions, prevent purchases, allow or disallow apps and more. See what parental controls are available on [Apple iOS devices](#).

Apps and online services

Many social media, apps and online services such as film and TV streaming services have features such as:

- content filters
- chat filters
- privacy settings
- in-app purchase settings.

You can find out about these features by looking in the settings on each app or take a look at their website for more information. They might be called settings, family features, privacy or security.

Meta has a [safety centre](#) which helps explain the features available across its platforms including Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

For **Netflix**, you need to visit the website to set up [parental controls](#) – we suggest you do this as soon as you create an account.

Microsoft Family Safety – by creating a family group you can manage many settings, such as setting screen time limits, blocking inappropriate content, receive activity reports, set app and game limits and more. To learn more about Microsoft Family Safety see the [Microsoft page](#) and [Xbox Family Settings](#).

Search engines

Sometimes, innocent searches can lead to not so innocent results. If you're worried:

- make sure the content your child sees online is appropriate for their age by using parental controls and filters in the search engines you all use
- make sure you have set parental controls on the home broadband and devices.

[Google Family Link](#) - a very useful app to manage a range of features such as restricting content, approving or disapproving apps, setting screen time and more. For lots of useful information see the [Google FAQ page](#).

WiFi and being away from home

The controls you've set up on your child's device, and your home broadband won't work if they use 3G, 4G or 5G, public Wi-Fi or log onto a friend's connection instead. Remember:

- public Wi-Fi is often available when you're out and about, but it's not always safe
- some public places and businesses offer family-friendly Wi-Fi. When you see the family-friendly Wi-Fi symbol it means there are filters to stop children from seeing inappropriate or upsetting content
- talk with your child and agree what they can and can't do online. If your child is visiting friends or family, remember that they might not have the same controls set up.

The limits of parental controls

Whilst parental controls are a helpful tool there are limitations. So, they shouldn't be seen as a whole solution. Even if you've put things in place on your home broadband and your child's device, they won't help if your child connects to a different Wi-Fi with no controls in place.

Parental controls are just part of the way you can help keep your child safe online.

More top tips include:

- Talking to your child. Explain why you are setting parental controls; to keep them safe. But also let them know that they can talk to you to discuss why certain settings are in place.

- Set good, strong passwords where you are able. On some parental controls you can set a password which prevents settings and features from being changed.
- Age is a significant factor; as children get older, restrictions and controls you use will change, but only at a pace that is appropriate for your child, not pressure from your child “because everyone else is allowed”.
- Content filters are never 100% effective, it is likely at some point that your child will see inappropriate or upsetting content, and it is important that you are able to talk to them about this.

Supporting children at different ages with their use of technology

Read these helpful tips to help you determine what is right for your child in terms of tech ownership and usage throughout childhood.

There are no exact rules about the right age to give your child access to technology. Every child's different and will mature in their own time. Parents are making choices about whether and when to grant greater independence and freedom.

Whether you're handing down an old device or buying your child a new bit of tech, it's important to think about:

- The age you give your children their own device.
- The access your child has to online platforms and services.

We regularly speak to children and their families about access to technology and consider this alongside what evidence tells us about its impact.

Here are some helpful tips to help you determine what's right for your child in terms of tech ownership and usage throughout childhood.

Advice for parents of under 5s

- **Supervise use** - We recommend this age group only have supervised access to technology. This means that they should only be using technology when fully supported by a parent or carer.
- **Use family devices, accounts and services** – Use child friendly devices and services like children's tablets and child versions of popular video sites.
- **Check content first** – Check the content on apps and games each time before use and turn off features like 'autoplay' so you can be in control of what is shown next.
- **Set up your parental controls** – make use of safety settings across your home Wi-Fi, devices and accounts.

- **Start safety conversations** - it's important to start talking about safety online as soon as your child is using technology.
- **Establish healthy habits** - Make technology use purposeful from a young age by making sure it's playing a positive role in your family. You can do this by watching and enjoying age-appropriate online videos together.

Advice for parents of children under 10 years old

- **Enable access to devices with limited features** - Device usage at this age is best kept to devices with limited capability. This could include tablets without data and non-smart phones that only allow calls and texts.
- **Keep tech use visible in the home** - Try to keep tech use in shared family spaces or used with bedroom doors open. This will allow you to support your child and be more aware of what they are doing online.
- **Follow age ratings** – Apps, sites and games come with age ratings which are important to follow. You can find out the age rating on the website for the platform or by visiting [Common Sense Media's reviews](#).
- **Use safety settings** – Explore the in-app and device safety settings with your child and check them regularly to make sure they are still in place.
- **Revisit parental controls** – as children grow up and need the internet more for schoolwork you may want to adjust your parental controls. Keep checking these regularly to make sure they are in place.
- **Have regular safety conversations** – at this age online safety conversations should be happening regularly.
- **Build healthy habits** - acknowledge the positives it brings as part of your safety conversations and agree rules and boundaries together as a family.

Advice for parents of pre-teens and teens

- **Follow age requirements** - Many popular apps, sites and games are 13+, it's important to check and follow these with pre-teens.
- **Speak to phone providers** - If your child owns their own smartphone then contact the service provider to make sure it is registered as a child's device. This means additional safety restrictions can be put in place.
- **Support your child with their settings** - Support your child to manage their safety and wellbeing settings across devices and accounts.
- **Focus on regular safety conversations** – It's important to keep conversations regular at this age.
- **Share youth facing help and support** - Make sure your child knows about services that can help like Childline.

- **Revisit parental controls** – you will likely need to revisit your parental controls again at this age and adjust them. Keep checking these regularly to make sure they are in place.
- **Explore healthy habits together** – Healthy habits work best when all the family agrees to following them. This could be agreeing to charge devices away from beds to support sleep and not using devices during mealtimes to help take breaks.

Advice for parents of children with SEND

- **Parents are best placed to know their child** – This is particularly true for children with SEND. We recommend parents consider the right age and stage for their child based off the level of support they need.
- **Make use of tech to support** – We know tech can be vital for communication, learning and sensory or emotional regulation for children with special educational needs. It's important that children continue to receive access that is right for them.
- **Explore all relevant strategies** – While age-based recommendations may not be appropriate they can instead be approached as a list of practical strategies for parents to explore.
- **Use resources tailored to children with SEND** – NSPCC worked with Ambitious about Autism to create [tailored advice and resources for parents](#) to use with their children.

Frequently asked questions from parents and carers

What to do if your child already has their own device or account?

It's important to remember every child and every family is different and will have differing views on technology ownership and usage. Giving a child independent access won't mean they will necessarily experience harm online, but they should be very clear about what to do if something happens that does trouble them.

If your child already has their own device or account, consider if you could make it for your whole family instead. Make sure safety, privacy and wellbeing settings are turned on and devices don't have passwords which aren't known to you. Finally, agree rules and boundaries for use, have regular safety conversations and make sure your child knows about the support they can access via services like Childline.

My child is pushing for their own device/ account, what should I do?

Talk to your child about why they want it and what they would use it for. It may be that you could increase access to the apps and games they want on family devices and accounts. Check with other parents and school about guidelines and review age ratings together with your child.

Another family member has given my child a device/ account before I wanted them to have it, what can I do?

We know families don't always agree on the right age to give their child a device or their own account. When one family member chooses to allow access earlier this can be challenging.

Turn on all safety settings and talk to your child about online safety. If possible, discuss shared rules and boundaries for online activities with the family member.

If you are not able to do that, breakdown your households' rules and boundaries to things you want from your child when they are with you (e.g. set time limits) and healthy and safe habits they can always have (e.g. asking for help, adjusting notifications settings)

I don't want my child to have access to technology, how should I manage that?

It is a parent's choice if and when they want to allow their child access to devices and online platforms. Whether your child has access at home or not they will still likely have some access through school, clubs and friends so it's important to discuss online safety with them in any case and explain why you'd prefer to delay access.

I'm worried my child is now online too much, how do I get them to reduce their screen time?

Agreeing rules and boundaries for the family is an important step in managing time online. Talk to your child about their online activities and agree time limits that work for them. For example, if a game play lasts 20 minutes you may want to base time limits around that. You could consider limiting time on certain days to start with as well, for example weekdays.

We would also recommend exploring wellbeing features with your child and turning off features like autoplay and notifications as this can make it harder to take regular breaks.

Finally, make sure you are also modelling healthy behaviours including taking regular breaks and not using devices during family time.

Why is 13 years old often used for age requirements?

The age of 13 is often used for age requirements across popular apps and sites. This age was originally set for data laws preventing companies from holding data of under 13s without parental consent. Games age ratings are based on the PEGI age rating system which reviews content within a game to make a judgement on age requirements.

Internet connected devices

Get advice about what internet connected devices or toys are and how to keep your child safe

What are internet connected devices?

Many families have internet connected devices for their child or home. Internet connected devices are devices or toys that are connected to the internet via Wi-Fi, Bluetooth or a physical connection like a USB cable. They can also be connected to each other.

Internet connected devices can send and receive data, respond to voice commands and be controlled remotely using a smartphone app. They can also be called 'the internet of things'.

Types of internet connected devices

More and more things are becoming connected to the internet. As well as computers and mobile phones, there are:

- smart speakers, such as Google Home and Amazon Echo
- wearables, such as Fitbit and Apple Watch
- smart meters measuring household energy consumption
- toys with voice or image recognition, such as Hello Barbie™ and Furby Connect
- robots, drones and other mechanical toys, controlled via an app, such as Dash and Dot
- smart TVs
- smart appliances
- smart doorbells.

What are the risks of internet connected devices?

Internet connected devices can have similar risks to devices like smartphones and tablets. These can be more likely to happen if the devices aren't set up properly.

Some of the risks of using internet connected devices are:

- other people might be able to access the device and content without you knowing such as a child's GPS activity tracker
- you may not be able to see that someone's connected to your device, but sometimes developers or hackers can see your content
- baby monitors, children's tablets and even remote-control helicopters or drone toys, can be hacked and used by people outside of your home
- internet connected devices can collect personal data, including audio and visual data.

Tips for keeping your family safe

Do your research

Research the toy and read product reviews and parent blogs. This can help you decide if they're suitable for your family.

It's also important to check which devices have internet. Many devices now have internet access, not just phones and computers. Anything that can communicate or provide information will need the internet, so check this on your device or toy before using it.

Read safety instructions

It's important to read the instruction manual to see the detail of what the device is, what it does and how to set it up safely.

Check apps and settings

Default settings might include things like GPS location tracking, public WiFi and camera or chat access. It's important to turn these off so your child can't be identified. Always check device privacy settings and make sure they're switched on.

You need to download an app to use most internet-connected toys or devices. Check the privacy settings and permissions of any apps or products you download.

Be careful with passwords

Make sure that passwords are strong and you don't use the same password for multiple devices or accounts. Remember that children shouldn't have access to passwords used to change settings on internet connected devices.

Set up parental controls

Your home WiFi network and TV settings should be password protected. Think about setting up accounts for your children so they're only seeing age-appropriate content. For example, on TV streaming services like Netflix.

Switch off devices you're not using

Lots of people have old phones and devices that they don't use anymore. If it's not been used for months make sure you turn it off, so that it's not collecting any personal data. For any devices that you aren't going to use again, find out how to clear your personal data from the device.

Talk to your child

Talking to your child about what they're doing online and what devices they're using can help to keep them safe.

Reporting online safety concerns

What to do if you're worried about something a child has experienced online.

What to do when you see online abuse or inappropriate content

It may be that you, or your child, come across something upsetting or concerning online. It is important that you feel confident about what to do if you do see something inappropriate online, or if your child tells you they've seen something.

If you're worried about something a child or young person may have experienced online, you can contact the [NSPCC Helpline](#) for free support and advice. If your child needs more support, they can contact [Childline](#).

We have lots of advice below on how to report your online safety concerns in different situations.

Dealing with different safety concerns

Inappropriate contact from an adult

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP) helps keep children safe from online grooming. CEOP is part of the police service and sits within the National Crime Agency. If you suspect an adult is communicating with a child inappropriately, or a child is being sexually abused online, you should report this to the [CEOP](#).

CEOP have a [reporting page](#), as well as [resources on their website](#) to help keep children safe online.

Nude images of children online

Sometimes, innocent searches can lead to not so innocent results. If you come across an indecent image of a child online, it is important to report this to the [Internet Watch Foundation](#) (IWF) so that they can review this content. Some nude images of children are classed as Child Sexual Abuse material. If it is illegal, the IWF will take steps to take this down and safeguard the child.

The IWF's [reporting portal](#) can be used anonymously.

If nude images of your child are shared online:

If you know a young person who has had a sexual image or video of themselves shared online, and they're under 18, talk to them about Childline and the Internet Watch Foundation's [Report Remove](#) tool.

It allows young people to discreetly report a nude image or video shared online, to see if it's possible to get it taken down. Young people can get support from Childline throughout the process. They just need to follow 3 steps:

1. Follow the instructions to prove their age. They may need ID for this.
2. Log into or create a Childline account so they can receive updates on their report.

3. Report and remove: the IWF will review it and work to have it removed if it breaks the law.

Online gaming abuse

Online games are a great way for children to have fun and connect with friends, though sometimes gaming can go wrong, and abuse can occur on these platforms.

If you have concerns that a child is being groomed through an online game, you can report this to CEOP.

If you are concerned about other types of abuse via online gaming, Cybersmile has a Gaming Help Centre, where you can find:

- [In-game reporting systems](#) for some of the most popular games
- [Reporting systems of game platforms](#), outside of the game
- [Cybersmile's Global Support Service](#) – this can be used to get advice on online gaming related issues

Remember, if you're worried that a child is being abused, or at risk of being abused, you should contact the NSPCC helpline for advice, as the Global Support Service can have a long waiting list.

If you have concerns that the content in a game is inappropriate for its PEGI rating, you can raise this with the [Video Standards Council](#) by contacting them [here](#).

Online hate content

Online content which incites hatred should be reported to True Vision at [report-it.org.uk](#) which covers the grounds of race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or gender. This content should also be reported directly to the platform on which it appears.

Other types of online abuse

For other forms of online abuse and harmful content, such as bullying, threats, or self-harm and suicide content, you can report this directly to the platform where the abuse took place. This also includes content designed to impersonate someone else (e.g. creating a fake account pretending to be someone else). It is a good idea to take screenshots so you can share this with the platform if needed. [Report Harmful Content](#) can walk you through the reporting process for many popular sites.

If the content has remained online or the platform has not taken appropriate action, you can report this to [Report Harmful Content](#). They will look into the issue and ensure the correct processes have been followed and advise you on what steps you can take next.

Inappropriate adverts or videos

If you see an inappropriate online advert, you can report this to the [Advertising Standards Agency](#) (ASA).

If you see online television content that you think is inappropriate, you can report this to [Ofcom](#).

Online terror content

You can report terrorism-related content to the police's Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit at gov.uk/report-terrorism.

You can get further information on what to do if you come across terrorism-related content, or have suspicions about a person relating to terrorism, at the [Action Counters Terrorism site](#).

Any other concerns

If you're worried about something a child or young person may have experienced online, you can contact the [NSPCC Helpline](#) for free support and advice.

Children can contact Childline any time to get support themselves.

Childline's [Calm zone](#) is also packed with tools and activities to help your child de-stress and discover new techniques that can support them when they're feeling down. Young people can also talk about their worries with others on the [Childline message boards](#).

Supporting your child through compulsive device use

What to do if you're worried about the time your child is spending online.

"When parents talk about children and technology, the word 'addiction' sometimes comes up."

That might be because they're concerned about the amount of time their children are using tech such as phones and games. Or they might think there's a link between their children's device use and their mental health.

Most struggles with technology aren't about clinical addiction, though. They're about habits, tech design and compulsive behaviours. This combination makes it hard for children and adults alike to put down our devices.

Understanding compulsion helps families respond with empathy and practical solutions to help change their children's behaviours.

When we treat our tech habits as something we can all improve on, conversations become more supportive and less judgmental. Rather than focusing on a child's 'smartphone addiction', families can work together so that everyone builds healthier relationships to tech.

What does compulsion look like?

If a child or young person is struggling with compulsive behaviour around technology, it can show in different ways. This might include:

- frequently arguing with you about device use and screen time
- withdrawing from friends or family to spend more time online
- difficulties at school – such as grades worsening or missing homework
- moods changing often or quickly, where there seems to be a link to device use
- using devices at times or in places that you've agreed they won't – such as in their bedroom, late at night
- getting symptoms such as headaches, eye strain and fatigue, and other causes have been ruled out.

Why avoiding technology can feel hard

Technology is intentionally designed to keep us engaged, using features like:

- notifications – which can signal urgency by making sounds, flashing onto screens or using the colour red for icons
- infinite scrolling – meaning there's always more content waiting for users
- autoplay – videos that start without you having to click or tap
- pull-to-refresh – a simple swipe can bring up new content
- suggested content – apps that line up the next video or other content for you
- rewards – including apps that offer daily bonuses for logging on.

These features tap into our curiosity and the reward systems in our brains, making it harder for us to stop using our devices, whatever our age.

Every time we get a notification or see a new post, our brain releases a small amount of dopamine – the chemical linked to pleasure and reward. This creates a cycle where we keep coming back for more.

Screen time and screen use

The first thing you might think about when it comes to your child's technology use is how much time they spend looking at screens.

That's understandable – it's a simple, quantifiable way to understand how much time they're spending online. But what children do online matters just as much as how long they do it for.

Educational apps and creative tools can really help support children's learning and imagination. And if children enjoy video calls with family, it can strengthen those relationships.

On the other hand, if children spend a long time scrolling or gaming, particularly late at night, it can disrupt their sleep and wellbeing. And if they see harmful content at any point, that can cause anxiety and distress.

Screen time and age

For older children, there's no magic number for a 'safe' amount of screen time, and not every online experience and interaction is the same.

That means monitoring screen time alone isn't a reliable way to make sure children are safe online. Even if a child spends a very short time online, they can be harmed if they see content that isn't suitable for them, or if they're bullied.

Balance and purpose

Children often tell us there's a real difference between online experiences they find beneficial and those which worry them. So rather than time online, think about balance and purpose.

Is the activity your child is interested in positive, creative or social? Or is it passive or stressful? It can also help to encourage children to reflect on how they feel after using technology. Are they feeling relaxed and happy, or tired and irritable? Share how tech affects you, too.

Having regular conversations about the impact of your time online can help you both learn more about your behaviour and make better choices.

Setting healthy boundaries as a family

Boundaries work best when they're consistent and they apply to the whole family. Why not sit down as a family and agree to some boundaries together? You could write down what you've decided on in a family tech agreement and display it somewhere you'll all see it regularly.

Small changes can make a big difference. Turning off notifications, using wellbeing tools, or setting time limits on apps can help everyone feel more in control. Some families create a 'charging station' where devices stay overnight, so bedrooms remain screen-free.

Tech-free times

You could try agreeing to times when you'll all step away from tech. These could be during meals, at bedtime, and when you're doing family activities.

Modelling good habits can help, too. If you put your phone away during family time, children are more likely to follow. And if you're distracted by your phone at dinnertime, your children will notice.

Remember: it's important that you work together on family boundaries rather than imposing rules that only apply to your children.

Questions and answers about tech use

1. How should I talk to my children about how they use tech?

Talk to children about healthy habits and balance, not addiction or punishment. Focus on curiosity, support and problem-solving, so the conversation stays positive and helps them make safer choices online.

2 . How can I help my children be more aware of how apps are designed?

You could talk to them about how and why apps use features like infinite scroll or autoplay. This can help you all be more aware and allow you to take practical steps like turning off autoplay and reducing notifications.

3. What can I do if peer pressure seems to be increasing tech time?

Encourage your children to make choices that feel right for them, instead of just copying what their friends do. You could try role-playing scenarios where they say 'no', to help build their confidence.

4. How can I make sure their screen time is worthwhile?

Creative apps and learning tools are usually better choices than endless scrolling. Encourage your children to access a variety of apps and platforms to learn, create and connect.

5. What's the most important time of day for children to be off devices?

Help your children to avoid screens an hour before bed. Getting a good night's sleep will help support their mental wellbeing and learning.

6. How can I encourage my child to balance screentime with offline activities they enjoy?

If your child likes reading, sports, playing an instrument, or any other offline hobby, you could gently encourage them to balance those with time spent online, as you would yourself.

Virtual private networks and online safety

This guide for parents and carers will help you understand the uses and potential risks of VPNs – tools that help manage how and where we connect online. We also have some tips to help you to start a conversation with your children.

“There are many different ways to access the internet. A virtual private network (VPN) is one of the tools that can help manage how and where we connect online.”

While VPNs can offer privacy and protection, they can also be used to bypass safety settings and access harmful content. Our advice for parents and carers explains what VPNs are, why children might use them, and how parents can respond in a way that supports safety, trust, and open communication.

What is a VPN?

A VPN is a tool that hides your location and encrypts your internet traffic. It can make it look like you're browsing from another country or using a different network. VPNs are often used by adults to protect their privacy, especially on public wifi.

Most VPNs are available as apps for phones, tablets, and computers. They can also be accessed through websites or built-in settings on some devices.

Many services require a paid subscription, but there are also free versions available – these often have limitations or may carry additional risks.

Do children use VPNs?

VPN use among young people is often motivated by privacy concerns rather than harmful intent.

Recent research by Childnet and Nominet¹ shows that 21% of children aged 8 to 17 have used a VPN, with usage increasing by age. The main reasons children report using VPNs are to stay safe online and protect their privacy (38%) and to access region-restricted content (30%).

In the report:

- almost a quarter (23%) of young people say they started using VPNs in the three months since the Online Safety Act came into force. This is consistent with the number who started using VPNs a year ago (21%)
- 16% of the children and young people who use VPNs say they used them to get around parental controls and 16% to get around school wifi blocks and monitoring
- about 10% of young people who use a VPN say they used them to look at things which they are not supposed to see for their age.

What children may access with a VPN

Using a VPN can significantly change what a child is able to access online. Without a VPN, most devices are subject to filters set by parents, schools, or internet providers. These filters help block harmful or age-inappropriate content.

With a VPN, children may be able to:

- access websites or apps that are blocked by parental controls or school networks
- view content restricted by region (e.g. adult content, gambling, or violent media)
- use anonymous browsing to hide their activity from their search history
- bypass time limits or usage restrictions set on devices or apps.

Without a VPN, children are more likely to:

- be protected by safety filters and content blockers which have been turned on
- have their online activity visible to parents or safeguarding software
- be limited to age-appropriate content based on device or network settings.

This shift in access can make it harder for adults to safeguard children effectively, especially if the VPN is used without their knowledge.

Conversation starters: younger children

The focus with young children is on sparking curiosity and basic understanding while providing reassurance. You could try:

"Do you know what a VPN is? Let's learn about it together."

"Some apps can hide what we do online. Why do you think someone might want to do that?"

"If you ever see something online that feels wrong or confusing, you can always talk to me."

Use simple language and analogies (e.g. 'a VPN is like wearing a disguise online') to build foundational understanding. Reinforce that safety rules are there to protect, not punish.

Seven top tips for parents

1. Understand what a VPN does

Take time to learn how they work and why they're used. This will help you have informed conversations with your child.

2. Build trust through open conversations

Children are less likely to hide their activity if they feel safe talking to you. Keep communication open and non-judgemental.

3. Ask why your child is using one

If you think your child is using VPNs to access the internet then stay curious, not confrontational. Use open questions like:

"What made you want to use a VPN?"

"Is there something you're trying to access that you can't normally see?"

This helps you understand their motivations – whether it's privacy, curiosity, or avoiding restrictions.

4. Talk about risks

Explain that VPNs can bypass safety settings, making it easier to access inappropriate or unsafe content. Some aren't secure and could put their data at risk. Remember, while risks exist, most children use VPNs for legitimate reasons such as protecting privacy and staying safe on public wifi.

5. Set clear expectations and boundaries

Include VPN use in your family's tech agreement. For example: 'We don't use tools that hide what we're doing online without talking about it first.' If you decide to allow them to be used, choose a reputable provider and set it up together.

6. Use parental controls to manage app downloads

Enable settings that require your child to request permission before downloading new apps. This gives you the chance to check apps before they're installed and spot VPN tools early.

7. Use it as a learning opportunity

Talk about digital privacy, surveillance, and online rights. Help your child understand when VPNs are useful (such as on public Wi-Fi) and when they can be risky.

Conversation starters: older children

The focus for conversations with older children will be around awareness, trust, and digital literacy. You could try:

"I know VPNs can be useful for privacy, but they can also be risky. What's your take on using them?"

"If you ever wanted to use a VPN, would you feel comfortable telling me why?"

"Do you think schools or parents should be able to see what you do online? Why or why not?"

Framing the conversation around curiosity and shared learning can help the conversation go well. It's best to avoid accusatory language – this age group may be experimenting with independence, so focus on building trust.

Framing the conversation around curiosity and shared learning can help the conversation go well. It's best to avoid accusatory language – this age group may be experimenting with independence, so focus on building trust.

VPN safety checklist for parents and carers

Children and young people are growing up in a digital world that's constantly changing. By staying informed, asking questions, and keeping communication open, you can help your child navigate online spaces safely and confidently. Here's a reminder of what you can do:

- Talk to your child about why they might use them.
- Check devices for installed VPN apps.
- Include VPN use in your family tech agreement.
- Know where to get help if you're concerned.

Children, phones and online safety

Find out how you can navigate phones and online safety for your child and encourage responsible use.

“With more choice than ever and rising concerns about safety, phone ownership can raise important questions for families.”

These might be:

- Is my child ready for a phone?
- How do I keep my child safe?
- What's the right approach for our family?
- Are children and phones a good mix?

Every child is different, and the decision about when to introduce a phone is down to the parents or carers – and should be based on your child's individual needs, maturity, and circumstances. While there's no one-size-fits-all answer, this guide is here to help you weigh the pros and cons, understand signs of readiness, and set up healthy habits from the start.

Is my child ready for a phone?

Before giving your child a phone, consider their emotional and social maturity.

It's helpful to ask yourself whether they can follow rules and boundaries – and if they understand what's safe and unsafe online.

Consider, too, whether they are able to talk to you if something worries them, and if they show responsibility in other areas of their life.

Together with Vodafone, we developed a [decision tool](#) with 8 questions to help you decide when is the right time for your family. We also have [advice on access to technology for different ages](#) to help guide your decision.

Why do some families choose to give their child a phone?

We often hear from families who have decided to give their child a phone, and their reasons vary widely. For many, it's a practical decision shaped by their child's growing independence and the realities of modern life.

Some of the common reasons include:

- Staying connected: Phones can help children keep in touch with parents or carers when they're out, especially as they start travelling independently.
- Learning and creativity: Many families value the educational apps, games, and creative tools that devices can offer.
- Developing responsibility: Managing a phone can be a way for children to learn about boundaries, time management, and digital responsibility.
- Social dynamics: Some families buy a phone for their child because they want them to feel socially included by their peers.
- Passing on old devices: Some families do this instead of buying a new phone. This can feel like a natural transition rather than a planned milestone and may lead to children having access to a phone earlier than originally intended.

Each family's situation is different, and the decision to introduce a phone is often a balance of benefits, concerns, timing and costs.

Not all families have the financial flexibility to provide smartphones or ongoing data plans, which can make decisions around digital access more complex. It's important to acknowledge this openly and explore alternative options, such as shared devices.

What are the risks and how do I manage them?

While phones can be helpful, they also come with challenges:

- Screen time: Without limits, children may spend too much time on their devices.
- Inappropriate content: The internet isn't always child-friendly, and children may come across upsetting or harmful material.
- Social media pressures: Children can feel anxious or pressured by likes, comments, and unrealistic content on social platforms.

- Harmful online interactions: Social media and messaging apps can expose children to bullying, peer pressure, or contact from people they don't know.
- Privacy concerns: Sharing personal details or location online can expose children to identity theft or unwanted contact.
- Unwanted or inappropriate contact: Children may be approached by individuals with harmful intentions, including grooming. This can happen through messaging apps, gaming platforms, or social media.

Questions and answers about children and phones

How do phones impact my child's wellbeing?

Phones can be helpful for communication and learning, but they can also affect wellbeing if not managed carefully.

Risks include disrupted sleep, reduced attention span, and increased anxiety from social media pressures. Setting boundaries and encouraging offline activities helps maintain balance.

I don't want my child to have a phone until they are older. How do I go about doing that?

It's important to explain your reasons clearly and consistently. Focus on the benefits of waiting, such as more time for play and face-to-face interaction. Offer alternatives like family messaging apps on shared devices or basic feature phones without internet access for emergencies.

My child could benefit from a phone for travelling to school but I'm worried about the risks. What do I do?

Consider a phone with limited features, such as calls and texts only, or use parental controls to restrict apps and screen time. Talk to your child about safe use, including not sharing personal details and reporting any unwanted contact. Regular check-ins and agreed rules can help reduce risks.

Six top tips to help you manage the risks

1. Talk regularly about how your children use their phone

You could start by asking what apps, games, or websites they use most often – as that could help you move on to discussing what they enjoy doing online and what worries them.

Through these conversations, you can set clear boundaries around screen time and device use. It's a good idea to encourage your children to take screen breaks and help them plan in offline activities.

2. Help children understand their right to feel safe online

Begin by explaining that they should never feel pressured, scared, or uncomfortable online and reinforcing that they can say no to things that don't feel right. Follow this up by teaching them how to block and report harmful behaviour and remind them that adults are there to help if something goes wrong.

3. Use safety and wellbeing tools together

A good place to start this is by exploring privacy settings on apps and games with your child. This will help to limit who can contact them or see their posts. You could also use wellbeing features, screen time limits or content filters and set up parental controls and filters where you feel that's needed.

4. Offer calm support when challenges arise

If you let them know they can talk to you without fear of getting into trouble, they'll be more likely to tell you if something is bothering them.

When they do share something worrying, it's best to stay calm as you're listening. If they see harmful content, then you could help them report or remove it. And reassure them that lots of people make mistakes online –most can be fixed and we can learn from them.

5. Keep the conversation going as they grow

As your children get older, you can still regularly check in about new apps, games, or trends they're exploring. Making online safety part of everyday conversations, instead of one-off talks, can help this feel more natural. It can help to stay informed about emerging risks and online behaviours. Adapt your guidance as they become more independent online.

6. Use the TRUST toolkit to guide safe sharing

Working through the [Vodafone & NSPCC TRUST toolkit](#) together can help to structure your conversations.

The toolkit covers:

- talking about who they will share their phone number with and why
- discussing what personal information should stay private
- encouraging them to think before sharing photos, videos, or location details
- reinforcing that TRUST means checking if something feels safe and talking to an adult if unsure.

Helping children stay safe on social media

Understanding the main social platforms and helping your child stay safe.

Children and young people use a wide range of social media platforms to connect, learn and express themselves. While social media can offer creativity, connection and learning, it's important to understand the risks and how to support children to stay safe online.

What children say about using social media

Children tell us that social media can have real benefits when used safely. It helps them stay connected with friends and family, express themselves creatively and explore new interests.

Children can:

- learn new skills through tutorials
- discover communities that share their hobbies
- build confidence and be creative by sharing their own content
- find support and feel less alone.

By helping children use social media thoughtfully, we can support their wellbeing and encourage safe, positive experiences online.

Understanding risks

Social media is deeply embedded in the lives of many children and young people, offering spaces to connect, create, and explore. However, these platforms can expose them to experiences that are difficult to manage without support. Understanding the specific risks is essential for helping children navigate these environments safely and confidently.

Unwanted contact

Children may encounter people online they don't know, and not all interactions are safe. Unsolicited messages, friend requests, or group invites can lead to uncomfortable or even dangerous situations.

Exposure to inappropriate content

Children can be exposed to harmful material through group chats, disappearing messages, and peer pressure. Social media algorithms can also add to this risk by suggesting content based on what users engage with.

Distorted body image and unrealistic standards

Filters, editing tools, and curated posts often present an idealised version of reality. This can lead children to compare themselves unfairly, which can affect their self-esteem and body image.

The pressure of likes and comments

Online engagement – likes, shares, and comments – can feel like a measure of self-worth.

Children may feel defined by their popularity online, leading to anxiety and a need for validation.

Five tips to help children stay safe:

1. Review safety, wellbeing, and privacy settings

Help children stay safe online by turning off location sharing and setting accounts to private. Use privacy controls to limit who can send friend requests, send messages or comment on posts. Support their wellbeing by helping them block or report harmful content, set app time limits, and have regular conversations about what they see and experience online.

2. Check age ratings and platform features

While most platforms require users to be 13+, some features, like live streaming or messaging, may still be unsuitable. Always review what's available and decide what's appropriate for your child.

3. Talk openly about social media

Have regular conversations with your child about what they're doing online. Ask who they're talking to, what apps or games they're using, and how different experiences make them feel.

Talk about what to do if something worries or upsets them and remind them that they can always come to you for help. These conversations help children feel supported and more confident in recognising and reporting anything unsafe.

4. Encourage safe and thoughtful sharing

Teach children to ask themselves: 'Would I send this to my family?' If not, it's best not to share it online, even via private messages as these can be shared on. Remind them never to share personal information like full names, school names, phone numbers, or live locations – and always to talk to you about who they're speaking with.

Support positive online experiences

Help children question what they see online and focus on positive body image. Encourage them to understand that their worth isn't measured by likes or followers, but by who they are offline.

Understanding social media terms

Many of these are used widely across lots of social media platforms, and some are only used on certain platforms.

Social media terms

Reel (Used on Meta platforms like Facebook and Instagram): Short-form video content, often edited and shared publicly

Story: Temporary photo or video posts that disappear after 24 hours

Snap (Used on Snapchat): A disappearing image or video sent via Snapchat

DM: Direct message – a private chat between users

Streak: A Snapchat feature that encourages daily messaging between users

Tag: Mentioning another user in a post or comment, often using the '@' symbol

Hashtag: A keyword or phrase preceded by '#' used to group content by topic

Filter: A visual effect applied to photos or videos, often used to enhance appearance

Livestream: Broadcasting video content live to followers or the public

Platform-specific safety hubs for parents and carers

These official hubs provide tools, guidance, and settings to help manage your child's safety on popular platforms. If you don't spot the safety hub for your child's preferred app, then it's a good idea to check apps that your child uses and the safety hubs / settings that those apps may have.

Snapchat

[Snapchat safety hub](#)

Offers: guides, tools, and the Family Centre for monitoring teen activity.

Features:

- family Centre for monitoring interactions
- location sharing off by default for teens
- bitmoji avatars to protect identity

TikTok

[TikTok account and privacy settings](#)

Offers: explains TikTok's safety features, Family Pairing, and privacy settings.

Features:

- restricted Mode for content filtering
- family Pairing to link parent and teen accounts
- private accounts by default for 13–16-year-olds

Instagram

[Instagram parents' guide](#)

Offers: supervision tools, safety tips, and educational resources.

Features:

- supervision Tools for account oversight
- hidden Words filter to block offensive content
- sensitive content controls
- built-in protections for teen accounts
- message limits for non-followers

YouTube Kids

[YouTube resources for parents](#)

Offers: parental controls, content filters, and screen time settings.

Features:

- YouTube Kids app with curated content
- restricted Mode for mature content filtering
- supervised accounts for older children
- disabled comments on child-directed videos

Facebook

[Facebook safety resources for parents](#)

Offers: Privacy settings, supervision tools, and guidance on reporting.

Features:

- Control over who can post, tag, and comment
- Tools to block, report, and delete messages

X (formerly Twitter)

[X safety and security](#)

Offers: tools for managing privacy, blocking, and filtering content.

Features:

- private account settings
- blocking, reporting, and muting tools
- controls for who can message, tag, or view posts

Chat apps

- Find out about different chat apps like WhatsApp and Kik, and how to help young people use them safely.
- Messaging and chat apps, such as WhatsApp and Kik, are a great way for a child to stay in touch with their friends and family but it's important both of you are comfortable with who they're talking to.
- Talk to your child about who they're chatting to and how they know them. Remind them to be conscious of who they're sharing personal information with and not to share information with people they haven't met before. This includes information like their name, location, email, phone number and school name.

What are chat apps?

- Chat apps allow the user to send messages, photos, videos and documents, as well as creating large group chats.
- Some apps allow users to message people they don't know, so your child could receive messages from people they don't know - most apps have settings to allow this to be changed so that they only receive messages from people they know. With your child, make sure these settings are in place and show them how to reject requests from people they don't know.
- Even with friends, your child might see something that upsets them. Explore each app to see if there are reporting and blocking features. Show your child how to use these features and talk about situations when they might want to report or block.

WhatsApp

Age rating: 13+

Main features: text, photo & video sharing, one to one and group chats, disappearing messages. End to end encrypted. Live location sharing.

Telegram

Age rating: 16+

Main features: text, photo & video sharing, one to one and group chats. End to end encrypted.

Viber

Age rating: 13+

Main features: text, call, share photos and send video messages, secret chats. End to end encrypted.

Signal

Age rating: 13+

Main features: text, photo & video sharing, one to one and group chats, disappearing messages. End to end encrypted.

Facebook messenger

Age rating: 13+

Main features: messages, photos, videos and audio recordings, and play games with your Facebook and Instagram friends and phone contacts. You need a Facebook or Instagram account to use Messenger.

Discord

Age rating: 13+

Main features: a chat app that's popular with gamers. It is often used to talk to other players while playing games.

Snapchat

Age rating: 13+

Main features: photos, short videos or messages, disappearing messages called Snaps.

Kik

Age rating: 13+

Main features: text, photo and video messages one to one or groups. The 'Meet New People' feature lets you start a conversation with random users

Chat apps: features, age ratings, risks and tips

A risk for children and young people using chat apps is being added to group chats where they don't know the other people in the group, which could increase the chance they come across upsetting or negative messages.

Many of the chat apps have different privacy settings to help restrict who can contact you. If your child is using a chat app, we'd recommend looking at the privacy settings to see what's most appropriate. If there aren't any options to restrict contact, then we'd recommend that your child doesn't use the app.

WhatsApp features, risks, safeguards and tips

WhatsApp is one of the most popular instant messaging apps. It allows you to send and receive messages, as well as make voice and video calls. You can connect with people individually or join group chats where lots of people can contribute. All you need to set up a WhatsApp account is a phone number.

Discord features, risks, safeguards and tips(Tab content expanded)

An instant messaging and chat platform that allows users to communicate using voice, video or text.

It's popular with the gaming community who use it to talk to people during gameplay, and swap tips about different types of games. However, recently it has grown its user base and is now used by others outside the gaming community.

What age rating is Discord?

It has an age-rating of 13+.

How does Discord work?

Users talk to each other on the platform via servers. A server is like a message board, where people can meet and chat to others who have similar interests to them.

Each server is focused on a different theme or topic. There are servers dedicated to discussing anything from Fortnite to food. Any user can create a server and invite people to it.

There are two different types of servers:

- text – lets users share text messages and images
- voice – these are like group voice chats. Anyone can join at any time and listen to the conversation in real-time (except invitation-only servers).

Normally there is also a chat function. All voice servers have a speaker icon next to them. You can have private, invite-only servers as well as public, all-access ones.

Is Discord safe for children? Risks, safeguards and tips

Some possible risks – and safeguards – are:

1) Inappropriate or harmful content

Some of the servers on Discord are themed around adult topics that might not be suitable for your child. There are also reports of harmful and illegal content being shared on the platform.

Discord's 'keep me safe' setting automatically scans and deletes direct messages that contain media items that go against its community settings. To enable this setting:

- go to 'User settings'
- select 'Privacy and safety'
- then 'Safe direct messaging'
- you will then need to select 'Keep me safe'.

The setting doesn't pick up text that contains inappropriate or offensive language, just media items such as photos.

2) Inappropriate contact from adults or other young people

Anyone over the age of 13 can join public servers on Discord. This could put your child at risk of communicating with someone who might not have their best interests at heart and wants to cause them harm.

There are different settings available that will help manage who can contact your child on the platform. By default, your child can be sent a private, direct message (most likely referred to as a DM) by other users who are in the same server as them.

You can disable this by going to:

- 'User settings'
- 'Privacy and safety'
- then select 'Server privacy default'
- move the 'Allow direct messages from server members' toggle to off.

You can also manage who can send your child a friend request. Being 'Friends' on Discord means you can communicate outside of servers.

You can access this setting by:

- going into 'User Settings'
- selecting 'Privacy & Safety'
- 'Who Can Add You as a Friend'.

You will then be given three options to help you manage who can add them.

These include:

- everyone – anyone on the platform can add them
- friends of friends – selecting this means that your child will be able to receive friend requests from users who they have mutual friends with
- server members – this means that your child can be added by
- anyone who has joined the same server as them.

If you don't want your child to receive any requests, you can deselect all three options. However, this won't stop them from sending out friend requests.

You should make sure to talk to your child about not accepting friend requests from users they don't know.

3) Puts them at risk of experiencing abuse or bullying

Some people behave differently online to how they would offline. This puts children and young people at an increased risk of being bullied on platforms like Discord.

The platform also has an option to donate to servers they follow or join paid-only servers. This means they could be pressured to send money to other users.

There are things you can do to help:

- the settings in section 2 will help limit who can contact your child
- discuss online safety and wellbeing together as a family. We have two quizzes to help you with this – an [online safety quiz](#) and our [online wellbeing quiz](#)

4) They could be pressured to send money to other users

There's an option to donate to servers they follow or join paid-only servers on the platform.

Discord safety centre

Their [advice for parents](#) includes information on the platform's features, how teens might use them, and tips and advice.

Kik safety settings

In Kik's privacy settings, under chat settings, there's an option called 'New Chat Requests'. If this is set to 'always', anyone on the app can privately message you. If this is set to 'never', you won't ever receive messages from people you don't know.

Telegram safety settings

Users of Telegram have privacy settings available to help you manage:

- who can see your phone number
- who can see when you were last online
- your profile photo
- who can call you
- and who can add you to groups and channels

End-to-end encryption

You might have heard about end-to-end encryption, but do you know what it is, and what that means for your child?

End-to-end encryption is where only you and the person or people you're communicating with can view the messages that have been sent.

The company who runs the messaging service or app can't view end-to-end encrypted messages, messages won't be remotely accessible by police or government when preventing crime, and they can't be seen by hackers. This means that the message privacy is more secure but also means they can't be monitored for illegal activity.

One-on-one messages (between you and one other person) or group chat messages (you and multiple people) can be end-to-end encrypted. This can include written messages, photos, videos, voice messages, audio, documents and calls.

A lot of popular apps are automatically end-to-end encrypted, and some are not. What's most important is how safe your child is on each app, site and game they use, whether it's encrypted or not. This means talking to your child about what they're sharing, who they're talking to and how to stay safe.

Randomised chat forums and apps

There are several sites and apps where the main aim is to randomly connect you to other users, this can be via text but also sharing images and videos as well as livestreaming. Many of these sites are designed for adults, however without age verification procedures in place young users can easily gain access.

There is a high risk that children could come across inappropriate or sexually explicit behaviour on this type of platform, as well as young people being contacted by adults they don't know. Monkey and Omegle are examples of this type of app.

Disappearing messages

Many chat apps now have disappearing message functions. This means that once a message has been viewed, or after a certain amount of time, it will disappear from the recipient's device. This type of message has additional risks for young people:

- This could give young people a false view that it is safe to share more risky content as it will disappear. However, the recipient can still screenshot or record the content before it disappears without the sender's knowledge or consent.
- Disappearing messages also make it harder to report inappropriate contact or content and makes it more difficult for enforcement agencies to capture evidence of child exploitation or abuse, such as grooming.
- Young people may feel that there is less risk of getting caught using disappearing messages which can encourage peer on peer abuse and bullying.

Different names for disappearing messages include 'snaps' and 'vanishing messages'. They're available on many different apps including WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat. Facebook has 'secret convos' that can only be seen on the device they are sent, they will not appear if you log into the account from a different device.

Make sure to talk to your child about what they're sharing and let them they know they should come to you or another trusted adult if someone sends them something upsetting or worrying. Looking at the reporting and blocking features on the app they use can be very useful for your child too.

Gaming chats

Many gamers use chat apps to connect with other players whilst playing games, or to swap tips and advice with other players in game-specific chats.

These chat apps are separate from the gaming platform (such as PlayStation). These chat apps are also used for more than just gaming chat, so it is important to discuss with your child about content they might see or be asked to send and what might happen to content that is shared.

Discord is very popular with gamers. They have a Parent's Guide and have three main recommendations help keep your child safe using the app.

1. Choose a secure, strong password.
2. Set who can send you direct messages and friend requests.
3. Block inappropriate content.

Whichever app your child uses, look at the settings and go through the steps together to make sure you both understand how to stay safe.

Chat rooms

There are many chat rooms/forums available for specialist topics such as hobbies or interests. There are also chat rooms which are meant just for adults such as sex chat rooms. Children and young people may be curious and want to find out more and as many of these sites don't have age verification procedures in place it can be easy for a child to access them.

You can use parental controls on your home Wi-Fi to restrict access to sites like these. But you should also talk to your child about what is and isn't appropriate.

Online chat rooms can increase the risk of grooming for sexual abuse. A groomer is someone who makes an emotional connection to try and make someone do what they want, such as:

- have sexual conversations
- send nude images or videos
- meet up in person.

Remember that people can mask their identity online to change their age, gender or pretend to be a coach or public figure. They will likely pay young people lots of compliments or offer things that they want to draw them into conversation.

Many of us talk to people online that we don't know – it can be a great way to stay connected and to gain information. However, it is important for children and young people to understand the risks of talking to someone they don't know.

Talk to your child about what they're sharing

It is important for children and young people to be aware of what they are sharing online and who might see it. It can be helpful to compare it to what they would be happy to share offline.

For example, they shouldn't give their phone number to someone they didn't know who approached them on the street, so it's important to not give it to someone you've only met online.

Remind them that they shouldn't share private things, such as:

- personal information, like emails, names, phone numbers, location and school names
- photos of themselves
- photos of their body, such as sexual photos or videos.

Children and young people should also consider that what they are sharing online may be shared further, to people they don't know, and they don't have control once it has been shared.

Talking to children about AI

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming a regular part of children's online experiences. From chatbots and homework apps to creative tools, AI can offer exciting opportunities for learning and play.

But it also brings risks, especially when children aren't sure what's real, who they're talking to, or how AI works.

Many parents and carers feel unsure about how to explain AI to children. This guide offers practical advice to help families talk about AI in ways that build understanding, encourage curiosity, and keep children safe.

What is AI?

AI stands for Artificial Intelligence – computer systems that can perform tasks that typically require human intelligence. Children may already be using AI without realising it, as many popular tools and platforms now include AI features.

Examples include generative tools like ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini, which can help with writing, coding, and problem-solving. And the Snapchat AI chatbot, that interacts with users in real time.

Common AI examples include:

- chatbots that answer questions or simulate conversations
- generative tools that create images, stories, or music
- deepfake technology that can produce realistic but fake videos or voices
- AI summaries on search results which offer a quick answer with links to sources.

It is becoming increasingly common for AI to be built into popular apps, devices and websites. It's important to check which apps and services your child uses and whether they include AI features.

Opportunities for creativity and learning with AI

When used safely and responsibly, AI can support children's development in several meaningful ways.

Creative tools that generate art, music, or stories can inspire imagination and self-expression, helping children explore ideas and build confidence.

AI-powered learning apps also support core subjects like spelling, maths, and coding, often adapting to individual learning styles and offering personalised feedback.

Games and platforms that use AI can encourage strategic thinking and problem-solving by presenting challenges that require planning and decision-making.

And AI can improve accessibility for children with SEND through features like speech-to-text and tailored learning pathways, helping to remove barriers and promote inclusion.

What are the potential risks of AI for children?

While AI can be fun and helpful, it also poses risks that children may not fully understand. So, it's smart to be aware of these potential pitfalls.

- Manipulation – AI can be used to create convincing but false content, which may influence children's beliefs or decisions.
- Misinformation – AI-generated answers or videos may look accurate but contain errors or misleading information.
- Identity confusion – children may struggle to tell whether they're interacting with a real person or an AI system.
- Exposure to harmful content – some AI tools may generate inappropriate or upsetting material.

- Cyberbullying and harassment – AI can be used to mimic voices or create fake messages which could be used to cause harm and distress.
- Privacy and data security – AI tools often collect data, and children may not know what's being stored and shared
- AI-generated abuse and sextortion – in rare but serious cases, AI can be misused to create abusive and illegal content.
- AI-generated sexualised or abusive images – some children may use AI tools to create fake nude or sexualised images of others, often referred to as 'nudification' or 'deepfakes'. Even if the image is not real, it can cause serious emotional harm, reputational damage, and may be illegal if it involves anyone under 18.

Eight practical ways parents and carers can support children

By learning more about AI, discussing it with your child and setting boundaries together, you can support children in practical ways as they navigate AI.

1. Explore the apps and websites your child uses

This can help you understand where AI is being used. Look for signs such as:

- labels like 'AI-generated' or 'powered by AI'
- fast responses that rely on short, focused prompts or commands
- content that includes links or references to sources.

AI features may appear in games, homework tools, and creative platforms.

2. Talk about what AI can and can't do

Try explaining that AI can be helpful but doesn't always get things right. You could use questions like:

- "Do you think this answer makes sense?"
- "Why do you think this video was recommended?"

3. Watch out for AI-generated content

Help children spot signs of fake images or robotic language and encourage them to ask questions if something feels 'strange'. You could both look out for clues such as:

- body parts that appear distorted, blurred, or out of proportion
- movements that seem unnatural or don't match the context
- backgrounds that look inconsistent or poorly blended.

While these are current signs something might be AI generated, as the technology advances it will become more challenging to spot the difference.

It's important to remind your child that not everything online is trustworthy and encourage them to check where the information came from. Look for named sources, links to reputable websites, or signs that the content has been verified.

4. Explore AI tools together

You could try image generators, story builders, or educational games together, then talk about how these tools work and where they get their information.

5. Set boundaries and expectations

It can help to agree as a family on when it's okay to use AI for schoolwork and remind children that AI is a tool, not a replacement for learning or effort.

Setting clear boundaries around how AI should be used can help ensure children use it respectfully and safely.

Explain that using AI to bully, embarrass, or harm others (such as creating fake messages or images) is never acceptable. And reinforce that misuse of AI can have serious consequences, both socially and legally.

6. Help your child understand what's appropriate to share

Explain that AI tools are not the same as trusted adults. Encourage your child to:

- avoid sharing personal details like their full name, address, school, or photos
- use AI for creative ideas or learning, but not for advice on worries, feelings, or safety concerns
- talk to you or another trusted adult instead of an AI tool if they feel upset, scared, or unsure about something online

7. Model positive behaviour and critical thinking

Children learn a lot from how adults use technology. You can support responsible AI use by showing how you use these tools safely, respectfully, and with curiosity.

You could try thinking aloud. When using AI, ask questions like:

- "Does this seem accurate?"
- "Where did this information come from?"
- "Is this a fair or respectful way to use this tool?"

Talking about digital ethics, such as fairness, honesty, and respect, can encourage reflection.

It's also helpful to promote help-seeking by reminding children they can speak to a trusted adult if something online feels wrong or confusing.

8. Know what to do if harmful or fake content is created about your child

If you discover abusive or fake AI-generated content involving your child, act quickly.

- Take screenshots or save links as evidence.
- Report the content to the platform where it appears using their reporting tools.
- Together with your child, you can request for it to be removed from the internet through our [Report Remove tool](#)
- If the content is threatening or illegal, contact the police and seek advice from your child's school or safeguarding lead.
- Talk to your child calmly, reassure them it's not their fault, and explain the steps you're taking to protect them.

Virtual private networks and online safety

There are many different ways to access the internet. A virtual private network (VPN) is one of the tools that can help manage how and where we connect online.

While VPNs can offer privacy and protection, they can also be used to bypass safety settings and access harmful content. Our advice for parents and carers explains what VPNs are, why children might use them, and how parents can respond in a way that supports safety, trust, and open communication.

What is a VPN?

A VPN is a tool that hides your location and encrypts your internet traffic. It can make it look like you're browsing from another country or using a different network. VPNs are often used by adults to protect their privacy, especially on public Wi-Fi.

Most VPNs are available as apps for phones, tablets, and computers. They can also be accessed through websites or built-in settings on some devices.

Many services require a paid subscription, but there are also free versions available – these often have limitations or may carry additional risks.

Do children use VPNs?

VPN use among young people is often motivated by privacy concerns rather than harmful intent.

Recent research by Childnet and Nominet¹ shows that 21% of children aged 8 to 17 have used a VPN, with usage increasing by age. The main reasons children report using VPNs are to stay safe online and protect their privacy (38%) and to access region-restricted content (30%).

In the report:

- almost a quarter (23%) of young people say they started using VPNs in the three months since the Online Safety Act came into force. This is consistent with the number who started using VPNs a year ago (21%)

- 16% of the children and young people who use VPNs say they used them to get around parental controls and 16% to get around school wifi blocks and monitoring
- about 10% of young people who use a VPN say they used them to look at things which they are not supposed to see for their age.

What children may access with a VPN

Using a VPN can significantly change what a child is able to access online. Without a VPN, most devices are subject to filters set by parents, schools, or internet providers. These filters help block harmful or age-inappropriate content.

With a VPN, children may be able to:

- access websites or apps that are blocked by parental controls or school networks
- view content restricted by region (eg adult content, gambling, or violent media)
- use anonymous browsing to hide their activity from their search history
- bypass time limits or usage restrictions set on devices or apps.

Without a VPN, children are more likely to:

- be protected by safety filters and content blockers which have been turned on
- have their online activity visible to parents or safeguarding software
- be limited to age-appropriate content based on device or network settings.

This shift in access can make it harder for adults to safeguard children effectively, especially if the VPN is used without their knowledge.

Conversation starters: younger children

The focus with young children is on sparking curiosity and basic understanding while providing reassurance. You could try:

"Do you know what a VPN is? Let's learn about it together."

"Some apps can hide what we do online. Why do you think someone might want to do that?"

"If you ever see something online that feels wrong or confusing, you can always talk to me."

Use simple language and analogies (eg. 'a VPN is like wearing a disguise online') to build foundational understanding. Reinforce that safety rules are there to protect, not punish.

Seven top tips for parents

Understand what a VPN does

Take time to learn how they work and why they're used. This will help you have informed conversations with your child.

Build trust through open conversations

Children are less likely to hide their activity if they feel safe talking to you. Keep communication open and non-judgemental.

Ask why your child is using one

If you think your child is using VPNs to access the internet then stay curious, not confrontational. Use open questions like:

"What made you want to use a VPN?"

"Is there something you're trying to access that you can't normally see?"

This helps you understand their motivations – whether it's privacy, curiosity, or avoiding restrictions.

Talk about risks

Explain that VPNs can bypass safety settings, making it easier to access inappropriate or unsafe content. Some aren't secure and could put their data at risk. Remember, while risks exist, most children use VPNs for legitimate reasons such as protecting privacy and staying safe on public wifi.

Set clear expectations and boundaries

Include VPN use in your family's tech agreement. For example: 'We don't use tools that hide what we're doing online without talking about it first.' If you decide to allow them to be used, choose a reputable provider and set it up together.

Use parental controls to manage app downloads

Enable settings that require your child to request permission before downloading new apps. This gives you the chance to check apps before they're installed and spot VPN tools early.

Use it as a learning opportunity

Talk about digital privacy, surveillance, and online rights. Help your child understand when VPNs are useful (such as on public Wi-Fi) and when they can be risky.

VPN safety checklist for parents and carers

Children and young people are growing up in a digital world that's constantly changing. By staying informed, asking questions, and keeping communication open, you can help your child navigate online spaces safely and confidently. Here's a reminder of what you can do:

- Talk to your child about why they might use them.
- Check devices for installed VPN apps.
- Include VPN use in your family tech agreement.
- Know where to get help if you're concerned.

If your child has seen inappropriate content

Sometimes, innocent searches can lead to not so innocent results. And sometimes, children may look for things because they're curious.

It's important to know how to reassure young people and help them know what to do and where to go for support if they see inappropriate content online.

Online harms: protecting children

Accessing and engaging with harmful content online can be damaging to children's wellbeing, leaving them scared and confused. It can also influence their behaviour or what they believe. But what is harmful online content? And what can we do to help keep children safe from online harm?

What is online harm?

Children and young people may be exposed to or engage with many types of harmful content online.

Some harmful content is illegal, like child sexual abuse images or content promoting terrorism. Other material might not be illegal but can still cause children harm, such as content promoting eating disorders. Content might be harmful to children and young people because it isn't age or stage appropriate. It may be overly influential, causing children to develop unrealistic expectations for themselves or others.

Harmful content may be user-generated or created using Artificial Intelligence (AI). There is increasing evidence that AI is being used to generate indecent images of children (IWF, 2023; UCKIS, 2023). Child sexual abuse images are illegal in the UK, regardless of how it is produced.

There are well established legal mechanisms in place to tackle and remove illegal online content. This means children and young people are less likely to be exposed to illegal content than legal but harmful content, although they may still come across it.

How are children exposed to online harm?

There are many ways children and young people could see harmful content online. Online platforms use algorithms which suggest new content based on what is popular or what users have previously interacted with. This means that suggested content can quickly lead children and young people to content that may not be age appropriate.

Children and young people may also come across content accidentally, when doing something else online. They might be sent harmful content by others. Or they might actively seek it out – for example, if they are exploring their sexuality online, they may come across harmful and age or stage-inappropriate content.

The impact of online harms

It's important to remember that all children and young people are different and what's harmful to one child may not be to another. The impact of online harms can depend on factors including the child's age, stage and maturity.

Experiencing harmful content can have a negative impact on children's wellbeing. They may feel:

- scared for their own, or others', safety
- confused or worried
- upset or uncomfortable
- excited or view the content as harmless
- compelled to share the content.

Children's and young people's behaviour, opinions and beliefs can also be influenced by harmful content.

Depending on the type of harmful content a child or young person has seen, you should:

- help them understand or process what they've seen
- answer questions or allay fears or worries
- make sure they have a safe space to talk in the future, if needed, rather than sharing harmful content with friends
- support them to block or report content to stop them encountering it again
- consider how you can help them to stay safe online in future
- make sure they know who to get help from if they ever see anything that's worrying or upsetting
- provide support for any underlying issues.

How can we prevent online content from causing further harm?

It's important to take action to prevent harmful content from being shared further.

Children, or adults, may do this because they want to warn others or raise awareness, or they may think the content is harmless or not consider the impact on others.

Illegal content should be reported and only deleted when this is agreed with the appropriate authorities. In the interim you should disconnect the device the image is on from Wi-Fi and data, turn off the device and store it somewhere secure.

There are specific measures in place to help respond to different types of illegal harmful content. For example:

- the government has created an [online form for reporting online material promoting terrorism or extremism](#)

- the IWF has a form for [reporting child sexual abuse images](#).

Where content is legal but harmful it may be appropriate to report your concerns to the platform, delete any content that has been downloaded to a device or uploaded to cloud storage, or review your filtering.

Responding to online abuse

Any child or young person can experience online abuse. If you've noticed something worrying, are concerned about something that's happened, or a child or young person has spoken out about abuse, then it's important you respond appropriately.

What is online abuse?

Online abuse is any type of abuse that happens on the internet, using technology like computers, tablets, mobile phones, games consoles and other internet-enabled devices.

Children and young people may experience several types of abuse online, including:

- bullying or cyberbullying
- emotional abuse (including emotional blackmail)
- harassment, stalking or other threatening behaviour
- online blackmail
- pressure or coercion to send sexual images
- sexual abuse
- sexual exploitation.

Children and young people may also be exposed to online harms, such as inappropriate behaviours or content online.

How online abuse happens

Online abuse can happen anywhere that allows digital communication, such as:

- social media
- text messages and messaging apps
- email and private messaging
- online chats
- comments on video or livestreaming sites
- chat in games, including voice chat
- immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality

Perpetrators exploit digital technology to initiate, maintain and escalate abuse. They may also groom children and young people online, using online platforms to build a trusting relationship with the intention of abusing a child or young person.

Perpetrators will often try to engage with young people across a variety of online platforms. They may also encourage children to move conversations to platforms that use end-to-end encryption (NSPCC, 2021). This means only the sender and recipient can see the content of messages which makes it harder to identify threats to child safety.

Online abuse may:

- be part of abuse that's also happening face-to-face such as bullying or an abusive relationship
- happen only online
- start online then develop into contact abuse.

Children and young people can be at risk of online abuse from people they know offline, or from people they have only known online. Children may have a false sense of safety online, which means they're more likely to talk to strangers. Perpetrators may also create anonymous profiles or pretend to be another child. This means children and young people may not realise who they're speaking to (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al 2017).

Children and young people can also experience further abuse, or be revictimised, if abusive content is recorded, uploaded or shared by others online – whether the original abuse happened online or offline.

Our research has shown that the impact of 'online' and 'offline' abuse is the same, no matter how the abuse took place. (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017). However it happens, it can feel relentless and like there's no escape.

Recognising the signs of online abuse

It's not always easy to recognise the signs that a child or young person is experiencing online abuse. You might see a change in a child's or young person's behaviour, or you might notice that a child has become much more isolated. Being alert to changes in behaviour is key to helping spot when something might be wrong.

Signs and indicators

Many of the signs that a child is being abused are the same regardless of the type of abuse they are experiencing.

You should look out for any behaviour or emotional changes that a child may display. For example, they may become angry or irritable, or they might seem low or anxious. You may notice changes in their eating or sleeping habits. (DCMS and Home Office, 2020) (Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2017)

Be aware of any changes in what children say, for example if they start using inappropriate language for their age.

A child or young person who is experiencing online abuse may also (Stop it Now, n.d.):

- **become more secretive about their devices or who they are talking to:** It's normal for children and young people to want more privacy as they get older. But if this is accompanied by unusual or strong emotional reactions, there may be something wrong. For example, young people may hide their screen when someone approaches or share less information than normal about what they do online. They might behave agitated, anxious or fearful if someone picks up or wants to use their phone or other device.
- **appear isolated or withdrawn from their usual friendships and activities or have new friends:** You may notice that a child or young person is spending less time with their existing friends. Or they may be spending a lot of time with a new friend but offer very little information about who they are or what they are doing. They might go out for long periods, start missing school or cancelling other activities that they used to enjoy.
- **spend more (or suddenly less) time online:** Children and young people may start spending increasing time online, perhaps staying up late, when they hadn't done previously. They might spend more time talking with new online friends. Or they might stop using their phone or other devices with no explanation.

Signs vary and will depend on the individual child or young person, and the type of harm they are experiencing. Read more about:

- cyberbullying
- sexting, or sharing nudes
- grooming
- child sexual exploitation
- harmful sexual behaviour
- child sexual abuse.

Vulnerability factors

Although any child or young person can experience online abuse or harm, research suggests there are some factors that can make children and young people more vulnerable to abuse.

These factors include things like:

- age
- gender
- being LGBTQ+
- loneliness or social isolation
- living in care
- special educational needs or disability

- mental health problems
- previous experiences of abuse.

(Ansary, 2020; Katz and El Asam, 2020; May-Chahal et al, 2018; Nominet, 2022; Stoilova et al, 2021; Turner et al, 2023; Wachs et al, 2021; Zhao et al, 2022).

If a child or young person has multiple vulnerabilities, this can increase their likelihood of encountering online risk. (Katz and El Asam, 2020)

Risks assessing online platforms

Each online platform has its own set of benefits, and risks. The Online Safety Act 2023 places legal duties and responsibilities on online service providers to keep children and young people safe online. You should also ensure you properly risk assess any online platforms you use with children and young people. When carrying out a risk assessment, make sure you bear in mind the specific needs and vulnerabilities of the children you work with.

[> Read more about the Online Safety Act 2023](#)

Barriers to disclosing online abuse

As with all forms of abuse, a child or young person may find it difficult or be reluctant to speak out about the abuse they've experienced online. They may:

- not understand that they are being abused
- feel dirty or ashamed
- be too embarrassed to share the details of what's happening to them
- be afraid because of threats of violence from the abuser
- have been told by the abuser that they won't be taken seriously
- have established an emotional attachment with the abuser and don't want to get them in trouble. (NSPCC and O2, 2016).

They may also blame themselves for the abuse and not expect to get any support. This might especially be the case if they have experienced unsupportive approaches from school, peers and family (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017). Or they may be worried that they will be banned from going online if they speak out. (Allen and McIntosh, 2023).

If a child has experienced sexual abuse online, their abuser may also have threatened to share sexual images of them if they tell anyone about the abuse. This means they might be frightened to speak out.

Online harms: protecting children and young people

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they believe. But what is harmful online content? And what can we do to help keep children safe from online harm?

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- upset or uncomfortable
- excited or view the content as harmless
- compelled to share the content.

Children's and young people's behaviour, opinions and beliefs can also be influenced by harmful content.

How can we prevent children and young people experiencing online harm?

There are lots of measures you can put in place to help reduce the risk of children experiencing online harm.

Start by considering how your organisation and the children you work with currently use technology and access the internet. Assess any potential risks and set out how you will respond to them.

Your online safety policy statement should set out your commitment to keeping children safe online and your expectations about how children, young people, staff and volunteers should use the internet safely.

Make sure everyone in your organisation is aware of the risks of online abuse and harm; and that the children you work or volunteer with are able to identify that content may be harmful, know not to share it with others, and know how to seek help and support if they come across anything that worries them.

Technical solutions, such as filtering and monitoring systems, can also help manage access to harmful content.

How can we support children and young people who have experienced online harm?

Whether a child has sought out the content intentionally or come across it accidentally, you should always offer them support. What this entails will depend on the nature of the harmful content, the context of the situation and the individual child or young person's needs. Remember, if a child or young person has actively sought out the content, this may indicate there's another concern in the young person's life.

Depending on the type of harmful content a child or young person has seen, you should:

- help them understand or process what they've seen
- answer questions or allay fears or worries
- make sure they have a safe space to talk in the future, if needed, rather than sharing harmful content with friends
- support them to block or report content to stop them encountering it again
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Where content is legal but harmful it may be appropriate to report your concerns to the platform, delete any content that has been downloaded to a device or uploaded to cloud storage, or review your filtering and monitoring systems.

Training to help keep children safe from online harms

Our online safety training course contains lots more information about the different types of content, what the law says, what you need to do to keep children safe and how you can support children and young people affected by harmful online content.

Watch video interviews with experts, complete interactive quizzes and review example scenarios. The training course will give you the confidence you need to address online safety in your school or organisation and will help you create an action plan to keep children safe online.

Social media, online communities and safeguarding

Social media can have many benefits for organisations, helping you to:

- stay in contact with children and families between meetings, activities and events
- provide specialist support to children, such as counselling and therapy
- promote events
- livestream activities and run online sessions
- create online groups, forums and communities.

However, there are also risks. Children and young people may be exposed to inappropriate or upsetting and harmful content, or they might experience abuse online. So, it's important that you put appropriate measures in place to help keep children safe online.

What are online communities?

Online communities are groups of people that come together in a virtual environment. You can use online communities to connect with more children and young people or provide additional support and services. Online communities might use a specially designed platform or existing technologies such as:

- messenger platforms
- forums, messenger boards or chat rooms
- social media apps or websites
- gaming platforms
- blogs.

Whichever platform you use, safeguarding and child protection should be at the heart of your online community.

Are social media and online communities different?

Social media enables people and organisations to share information through text, images, audio recordings and videos. You may use social media without intending to create an online community. However, once people start interacting with your page or profile it becomes an online community and you have a responsibility to take steps to keep everyone who uses it safe.

Grooming: recognising the signs

What is grooming?

Grooming is a process that "involves the offender building a relationship with a child, and sometimes with their wider family, gaining their trust and a position of power over the child, in preparation for abuse."

Grooming can happen anywhere, including:

- online
- in organisations
- in public spaces (also known as street grooming).²

Children and young people can be groomed by a stranger or by someone they know – such as a family member, friend or professional. The age gap between a child and their groomer can be relatively small.

Grooming techniques can be used to prepare children for sexual abuse and exploitation, radicalisation or criminal exploitation.

Recognising that a child is being groomed

It's rare for a child to tell an adult about being groomed.

Children may not feel able to seek help because they:

- are unaware that they're being groomed
- believe they are in a caring relationship and are worried about jeopardising it
- are scared of what the groomer will do if they speak out
- don't want to get the groomer in trouble
- blame themselves for getting involved in the relationship
- are ashamed or worried about sharing what's happened to them with other people.

If a child does speak out, you should reassure them that they've done the right thing in telling you, and that what's happening to them is not their fault.

Which signs should I look out for?

Professionals should be aware of and able to recognise signs that a child may be being groomed.

Signs a child is being groomed include:

- sudden changes in behaviour, such as spending more or less time online
- spending more time away or going missing from home or school
- being secretive about how they're spending their time, including when using online devices
- having unexplained gifts, big or small
- misusing alcohol and/or drugs
- having a friendship or relationship with a much older person
- developing sexual health problems
- using sexual language, you wouldn't expect them to know
- seeming upset or withdrawn
- mental health problems.

Signs of grooming can easily be mistaken for 'typical' teenage behaviour, but you may notice unexplained changes in behaviour or personality or inappropriate behaviour for their age.

Grooming behaviours

Groomers typically use certain patterns of behaviour to lead a child to believe that what is happening is normal, or to make the child feel trapped. The grooming relationship can move quickly from being something that seems to have positive benefits for the child to being very frightening and isolating.

Gaining trust

A groomer hides their true intentions and over time "gains the child's trust and confidence" in order to abuse them ([Sexual Offences Act 2003: explanatory notes](#)). The child or young person is conditioned to respect, trust and love their groomer. They may not understand they are being groomed because they consider their groomer to be a friend, boyfriend or girlfriend.

The groomer may also work to gain the trust of a whole family, to allow them to be left alone with a child. If the groomer works with children, they may use similar tactics with their colleagues.

Groomers gain trust by:

- pretending to be someone they're not, for example saying they are the same age as the child online
- offering advice or understanding
- buying gifts
- giving the child attention
- using their professional position or reputation
- taking the child on trips, outings or holidays.

Gaining power

Once they've established trust groomers will exploit the relationship by isolating the child from friends or family and making the child feel dependent on them. Groomers will use power and control to make a child believe they have no choice but to do what the groomer wants.

Secrets

Groomers may introduce 'secrets' as a way to control or frighten the child. Sometimes they will blackmail the child or make them feel ashamed or guilty to stop them telling anyone about the abuse.

Manipulation

Groomers use a range of strategies to entrap a child and manipulate them. They present themselves as approachable, likeable and having shared interests with the child they are targeting.

Our Childline service offers support and advice to children and young people who have been groomed. One young person told us about how a manager of an online game had used the offer of making him a moderator as part of the grooming process.

"At first I thought it was cool this manager was giving me extra responsibility on the server. They told me how much they trusted me which made me feel important. Lately though things have got a bit weird, like they say 'I love you' a lot - they say it so much that it makes me feel like I have to say it back. We've also been watching movies together, and most of the stuff they want to watch is explicit and meant for adults."

Childline counselling session with a boy aged 13

Groomers will test a child's compliance by persuading them to carry out inappropriate or abusive activities. They use tactics such as reverse psychology (for example, "I'm not sure about this, I think you might be too young") or strategic withdrawal (such as, "It was just an idea, it's completely up to you") which give the child the impression they are in control of the situation.

Online grooming

Groomers can use social media, instant messaging apps or online gaming platforms to connect with a young person or child. It's easy for groomers to hide their identity online – they may pretend to be younger than they are and then chat and become 'friends' with children.

Groomers can use multiple online platforms to contact the same child. They can spend time learning about a young person's interests from their online profiles and posts and then use this knowledge to help them build up a relationship. Then, once a relationship has been established, they might encourage the child to communicate using a private or encrypted messaging service.

Groomers may look for:

- usernames or comments that are flirtatious or have a sexual meaning
- public comments that suggest a child has low self-esteem or is vulnerable.

However, groomers don't always target a particular child. Sometimes they'll send messages to hundreds of young people and wait to see who responds.

The online environment makes it easier for groomers to target several children at once. It can also make the grooming process much quicker.

Groomers don't need to meet children in real life to abuse them. After making online contact, a groomer may convince a child to meet in person. However, groomers can also sexually exploit children and young people by persuading them to take part in online sexual activity. The Internet Watch Foundation found that over 70% of identified child sexual abuse images in 2021 were self-generated.

Social media and other online platforms are also used to groom children to involve them in criminal exploitation, for example county lines.

Speaking out about grooming

It's rare for a child to tell an adult about being groomed. This means we don't know how common grooming is.

Children may not speak out because they're:

- ashamed
- feeling guilty
- unaware that they're being abused
- believe they are in a relationship with a 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'.

The grooming relationship can move quickly from being something that seems to have positive benefits for the child to being very frightening and isolating. Initially the child or young person is conditioned to respect, trust and love their groomer. They may not understand they are being groomed because they consider their groomer to be their boyfriend or girlfriend.¹⁸

The child may be uncomfortable with what they are being asked to do but not feel able to say no or seek help because they:

- are worried about jeopardising the relationship if they don't give consent
- are scared of what the groomer will do if they speak out or refuse to comply
- don't want to get the groomer in trouble
- blame themselves for getting involved in the relationship
- are ashamed of sharing sexual details with other people.

What makes children more vulnerable to grooming?

Grooming can affect any child regardless of age, gender, race or socio-economic background.

However, children who may be particularly vulnerable include:

- looked after children and children known to social care
- children who are exploring their sexuality and identity online
- those with special educational needs and learning difficulties (SEND), for example those who experience social and communication difficulties
- children with low self-esteem and confidence (those who might be lacking and seeking validation)
- children who have limited awareness about online risks
- those whose online activity isn't appropriately supervised or monitored
- children who aren't in mainstream education, for example due to school exclusion.

Children who contacted Childline about online sexual abuse also talked about:

- difficulties forming healthy relationships and trusting people
- struggling with eating and sleeping
- avoiding school or social situations
- experiencing mental health issues including suicidal thoughts
- losing trust in online platforms
- feeling lonely, ashamed and embarrassed.

Those who have been groomed sometimes say their groomer was the first person who really seemed to understand and care about these issues. As with any form of abuse, children who are disabled and those who have already experienced abuse are particularly vulnerable to grooming.

Protecting children

Raising awareness

Communities can be the strongest allies in protecting children from grooming.

It's important for all professionals working with children to be aware of:

- what grooming is
- signs of grooming displayed by children
- typical grooming behaviours.

It's also important that professionals are aware of, and know how to respond to, the different types of abuse and exploitation grooming can lead to, including:

- sexual exploitation
- sexual abuse
- online abuse
- criminal exploitation
- county lines
- radicalisation.

Empowering children

Professionals working with children and young people should help empower them to recognise and speak out about abuse. This includes:

- teaching children and young people about healthy relationships
- helping children and young people develop the awareness and skills needed to keep safe online
- helping children to identify the safe people and places they are happy to go to for support.

Safeguarding, sexting and sharing nudes

Sexting is when people share a sexual message and/or a naked or semi-naked image, video or text message with another person. Children and young people may also talk about sharing 'nudes', 'pics' or 'dick pics'.

Children and young people may consent to sending a nude image of themselves with other young people. They can also be forced, tricked or coerced into sharing images by other young people or adults online.

Whether a child or young person shares an image consensually or not, they have no control over and often no knowledge of how other people might use or share it.

They may experience bullying or isolation if the image is shared around peer groups. Perpetrators of abuse may circulate a nude image more widely and use this to blackmail a child or groom them for further sexual abuse.

AI may be used to modify or 'nudify' an existing image of a child to create child sexual abuse material. These AI-generated images may then be used to blackmail children, families or organisations.

It's a criminal offence to create or share explicit images of a child, including when this image is generated by AI. However, the law is intended to protect children and not criminalise them. If a young person is reported to the police for sharing or creating an

image, the police will make an internal record but depending on the circumstances they may decide not to take any formal action.

Protecting children from bullying and cyberbullying

Bullying is when individuals or groups seek to harm, intimidate or coerce someone who is perceived to be vulnerable (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021).

It can involve people of any age, and can happen anywhere – at home, school or using online platforms and technologies (cyberbullying). This means it can happen at any time.

Bullying encompasses a range of behaviours which may be combined and may include the behaviours and actions we have set out below.

Verbal abuse:

- name-calling
- saying nasty things to or about a child or their family.

Physical abuse:

- hitting a child
- pushing a child
- physical assault.

Emotional abuse:

- making threats
- undermining a child
- excluding a child from a friendship group or activities.

Cyberbullying/online bullying:

- excluding a child from online games, activities or friendship groups
- sending threatening, upsetting or abusive messages
- creating and sharing embarrassing or malicious images or videos
- 'trolling' - sending menacing or upsetting messages on social networks, chat rooms or online games
- voting for or against someone in an abusive poll
- setting up hate sites or groups about a particular child
- creating fake accounts, hijacking or stealing online identities to embarrass a young person or cause trouble using their name.

Bullying and cyberbullying can be a form of discrimination, particularly if it is based on a child's disability, race, religion or belief, gender identity or sexuality.

Impact of bullying and cyberbullying

The emotional effects of being bullied include:

- sadness, depression and anxiety
- low self-esteem
- social isolation
- self-harm

(Bainbridge, Ross and Woodhouse, 2017).

“Every day I wake up scared to go to school, scared about the comments people will make and scared about walking home. Then I get in and log onto my social networking site and there are horrible messages everywhere. It’s like there’s no escaping the bullies. I’m struggling to cope with how upset I feel so sometimes I cut myself just to have a release but it’s not enough. I can’t go on like this.”

Childline counselling session with a girl aged 13

Bullying can affect children's performance and attendance at school. They may find it hard to concentrate on schoolwork and homework or be too afraid to go to school (Brown, Clery and Ferguson, 2011).

Bullying can happen at any time or anywhere - a child can be bullied online when they are alone in their bedroom trying to relax or do homework - so it can feel like there's no escape (NSPCC, 2016). This can make it even more difficult for children to cope with being bullied. Cyberbullying can make children feel more frightened and helpless than bullying that happens offline (Munro, 2011).

If a child is being bullied online, they may not know who is bullying them (the bully may have created an anonymous online account). This can be extremely frightening.

Children who have witnessed another child being bullied may also be distressed. They may not know the best way to help the person being bullied. They may fear for their own safety and experience feelings of guilt for not stepping in (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2017; NSPCC, 2016).

Who is involved?

Why children bully others

There are many reasons why children bully others and it's not always a straightforward situation. Some of these include:

- peer pressure and/or wanting the approval of others
- wanting to feel powerful over someone with a perceived disadvantage
- being bullied or cyberbullied themselves
- being worried, unhappy or upset about something
- lacking social skills or not understanding how others feel.

Children who bully others may not understand that they are making life difficult for another child and may find this realisation very distressing. It can be difficult for them to get the support they need to change their behaviour (NSPCC, 2016).

When posting online, children may not consider the impact their actions will have on others. Some children may be more likely to engage in bullying behaviour online as they can create anonymous accounts which may make them feel as if they can't be 'found out'.

Vulnerability factors

Any child can be bullied or cyberbullied. Children who are seen by others as 'different' in some way may be targeted (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2017).

This might be because of their:

- physical appearance
- race
- faith or culture
- gender identity
- sexuality
- disability or additional needs.

(Ditch the Label, 2019)

Or it could be because they:

- appear anxious or have low self-esteem
- lack assertiveness
- are shy or introverted.

It may also be because of a child's family circumstances or home life, for example if they are adopted or in care (Department for Education, 2017) or receiving free school meals (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2019).

Signs and indicators

Indicators that a child could be experiencing bullying or cyberbullying include:

- being reluctant to go to school
- being distressed or anxious
- losing confidence and becoming withdrawn
- having problems eating and/or sleeping
- having unexplained injuries
- changes in appearance
- changes in performance and/or behaviour at school.

Adults may notice that a child isn't spending time with their usual group of friends, has become isolated or that other children's behaviour towards a child has changed.

Reporting

If you think a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on **999**. If you're worried a child is at risk of serious harm but they are not in immediate danger, you should share your concerns.

- **Contact the NSPCC Helpline** on [0808 800 5000](tel:08088005000) or by emailing help@nspcc.org.uk. Our child protection specialists will talk through your concerns with you and give you expert advice.
- **Contact your local child protection services.** Their contact details can be found on the website for the local authority the child lives in.
- **Contact the police.**

Services will risk assess the situation and take action to protect the child as appropriate either through statutory involvement or other support. This may include making a referral to the local authority.

When responding to incidents or allegations of bullying it's important to:

- listen to all the children involved to establish what has happened
- record details of the incident and any actions you've taken
- inform parents and carers (unless doing so would put a child at further risk of harm)
- provide support to the child/children being bullied, children who witnessed the bullying and the child/children who has been accused of bullying
- ask the child/children who have been bullied what they would like to happen next

- consider appropriate sanctions for children that have carried out bullying
- continue to monitor the situation even if the situation has been resolved.

When responding to online bullying and cyberbullying:

- make sure children know not to retaliate online or reply to any bullying messages
- make sure children understand how they can take steps to prevent online bullying from happening again, for example by changing their contact details, blocking contacts or leaving a chat room
- ask the child if they have shared the bullying content with anyone else (if so, who).

If bullying content has been circulated online, take action to contain it:

- if appropriate, ask the person responsible to remove the content
- contact the host (such as the social networking site) and ask them to take the content down
- contact the [NSPCC helpline](#) for advice about what to do.

If the content is illegal, contact the police who can give advice and guidance.

Talk to children about:

- what bullying and cyberbullying are
- how it affects the people involved
- why people bully others
- what bystanders should do when they witness bullying
- the importance of children telling someone if they or someone else is being bullied.

Preventing online harm and abuse

Technology is an integral part of children's and young people's lives. It has transformed the way they learn, play, connect and communicate.

But these opportunities don't come without risk. Children and young people may experience abuse online and they may be exposed to harmful content. And this can have a long-lasting impact on their wellbeing.

Every child deserves to be, and to feel, safe online. And we can all play a role in helping make online spaces safer for children and young people by:

- talking to children and young people about anything worrying they experience online
- recognising how important the online world is to children and young people, and talk to them about it

- making sure online safety is an ongoing journey with children and young people, not just a one-off session
- setting rules for the use of online platforms. Involve children and young people in setting these and make sure they're well understood
- using technical solutions to manage access to online platforms and make sure everyone knows about and understands why you've put them in place
- helping children and young people understand and manage their privacy settings online.

If your child has seen inappropriate content online, you can:

- talk with them about what they've seen – let them know what is, and isn't, appropriate for their age.
 - they may have questions about what they've seen – you can get support for yourself by contacting our [NSPCC helpline](#) to support you with tackling difficult conversations.
 - find out how they came across the content so that you can minimise the risk in future e.g. by blocking certain sites and setting up parental controls or educating your child about following links.
- reassure them they can come to you, another trusted adult or [Childline](#) if they're worried about something.
- get advice on setting up [parental controls](#) and make sure you review them regularly to ensure they are right for your family.
- avoid 'sharenting' or sharing explicit or inappropriate content you've seen online to raise awareness. Sharing content of physical or sexual abuse is illegal and can be upsetting to the child and others who come across it.
- report any inappropriate, illegal, explicit, identifying or distressing content to [CEOP](#) through their website.

Other people children can talk to

No matter how hard we try, there may be things that children won't open up about. So, it's important that we give them other options. That could be:

- another adult family member, e.g. aunt, older cousin etc.
- a teacher or member of the pastoral team in school
- Childline on 0800 1111 or visiting the [Childline website](#).