

Keep children safe online:

Practical tips for parents and carers





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It can be daunting when your child starts to interact with the online world. But as digital technology plays such a huge part in our lives and bring with it many benefits, it is vital that we teach children and young people how to use it responsibly, and help harness healthy attitudes, habits and digital resilience. Schools are recognising their role, and starting to build awareness, but what can you do as a parent?

Your approaches may differ depending on the age of the child. When they are young, it may be easier to instil habits and attitudes as they are still learning and you have more control over their technology. Whereas the older they are, especially as they get into their teenage years, you may find it best to simply provide guidance and a listening ear, as well as the space for them to make their own choices.

There are many recommendations out there and this guide has been designed to give you ideas and approaches to consider and think about, but ultimately it will come down to your parenting style and what feels right to you.



So, what can you do to help?

Empower

Help empower them to take control of their technology use and understand the world they are interacting with, and how it can affect them.

Balance

Instil an understanding of the necessity for a balance between online and offline activities.

Online safety

Help them learn how to use their devices safely.

Empower

Have open, honest discussions

For many children and young people, their online world is as real and important as their offline world, and it's important that it can be talked about openly and honestly. Children need to realise that you are someone they can trust and talk to without judgement, otherwise they may be reluctant to open up. You may not always find this easy, but without these conversations, there will be no opportunity to support your child if they need it.

It is recommended to try and make technology use a regular, every-day conversation topic. Share your experiences and thoughts about it, and come to agreements as a family about how it should be used and what expectations there are. ChildNet has some useful resources to help you, such as the **Family Agreement**¹ template.



¹ www.childnet.com/resources/family-agreement



Encourage self-awareness and self-control

It is important that children develop self-control, and to achieve this they need to develop self-awareness around their use of technology. Setting time boundaries is useful here. Technology can be used to help here (see 'Set time limits' for more information), but it's important that children play a part in the monitoring, and become aware of how many hours they spend, and what they spend their time doing. As well as developing self-control, it will also help illustrate how technology can infiltrate their lives and prevent them from doing or participating in things that are crucial to their health and wellbeing, such as exercise, getting fresh air, spending time with loved ones and looking after themselves.

Be aware of their mood

Our online lives can bring about a range of emotions – high or low, aggressive or lethargic – and your child's mood will reflect this, but they may not always be aware of the connection. Keep tabs on how they are doing and check in with them, talking about the impact that technology can have on our moods and how to spot the signs. Discussions like these are useful as they help with their self-awareness and digital resilience.

Balance



Set time limits

As excessive screen time is becoming a concern, the World Health Organization has released recommendations. It recommends that children under one year old don't have access to screen time, and children between two to five years old have a maximum of one hour a day.

Technology drains our time, so it is great practice to set some time limits in order to gain a balance. As discussed earlier, this is a great way of building their self-awareness as well. Many devices have apps which can help manage how much time is spent on them, but you can also download apps too. These apps have a range of uses such as allowing you to track, approve and block apps and websites they use, track their location, monitor their calls and texts, and block unwanted numbers. **Educational App Store**² has a list of recommendations of such apps and parental control software.

There are also apps which focus less on monitoring what they use and more on encouraging a balance of their time, such as **UnGlue**³. This one also ensures the child is involved in the monitoring.

But if you feel your child can monitor their own time without your input, they may want to use apps such as **RescueTime**⁴, which allows them to track the minutes spent on websites and apps.

² www.educationalappstore.com/best-apps/best-parental-control-apps-to-monitor-and-limit-screen-time

³ www.unglue.com

⁴ www.rescuetime.com

Set tech-free times

It is important to demonstrate that technology doesn't have to be a part of every activity. It is excellent for some activities, but for others it is a distractor. For example, more families are declaring meal times as 'tech-free time', allowing time together with no distractions. It is also advised that devices should not be used an hour before going to bed as technology use can have a negative effect on the quality of their sleep and, ultimately, their mood.

Promote a balance of activities

It is important to encourage a balance between online and offline activities. As their devices can be addictive, children may find it hard to tear themselves away. Encourage them to take regular breaks and promote face-to-face conversation, physical activity and play. Arrange or encourage activities they can't do on a screen or don't need screens for, such as board games, books or an outside activity. Or arrange a trip together and agree that no one uses their devices – it's essential that everyone is involved in 'tech-free' time.

Promote a development of offline relationships

Devices are useful for helping children keep in touch with friends and family, especially ones who may not live close by, but it is important to encourage the development of offline relationships as well, as they are vital for the development of their social and communication skills.





Make bedrooms a device-free zone

Research is showing that technology can negatively affect sleep. Some suggest it is the device lighting whilst others suggest it is because children (and adults) cannot switch off from them in order to go to sleep. As sleep is so important to children's health, it is recommended that bedrooms should be a device-free zone, so the temptation is removed.

Advise on notifications and alerts

One way of gaining control over our devices is to alter the alerts and notifications. Advise children on how to silence them, manage which they see, or switch them off altogether.

Assess your own technology use

Children will follow our examples and pick up our habits, so if you are advising your children on technology use, you need to make sure you are following it too. Ask yourself - do you use your phone at meal times, or during face-to-face conversations? Do you use technology in the way you hope your children will?





Online safety



Create a safe online space

You need to help build their understanding of how to act safely whilst on the internet. This can include creating appropriate privacy settings, discussing how to block unwanted messages and the importance of being careful about what you share. You can also use parental control software or apps to help block any unwanted websites or apps. (See 'Set time limits' for more information.)

Choose age-appropriate apps, games and TV

As part of creating a safe online space, you need to assess what is suitable for their age. What are their developmental needs? What is the right age for a smartphone or a device?

It will come down to your child, as everyone is unique, as well as your wants too and what you feel is suitable for your child. Luckily there are many resources out there to advise with this, such as **Common Sense Media**⁵, an independent resource which reviews apps, games, TV shows and movies, and advises on age-related matters.

But you can also familiarise yourself with which apps are available, and help your child choose; use parental controls that filter content, and look at reviews.

⁵ www.commonsensemedia.org

Manage peer pressure

It can be hard to avoid peer pressure. Your child might come home asking for an unfamiliar game that is popular with their friends, and you are unsure if it is suitable – what do you do? It is important to do research: find out what the content is, what age rating it has and why it has been set at that age. Also read reviews to see if it sounds suitable – again, websites like Common Sense Media can help here. Then have a discussion with your child, especially if you decide that you don't think it is suitable – it is important that they understand how and why you came to the decision.

Discuss internet content

It is useful to discuss the types of unwanted, unhealthy or distressing content which can be found online. It could be of a highly-sexual or violent nature, or it may encourage them to question their body image or undertake harmful behaviours, and they will need to know what to do if they come across it. These discussions will provide them with the insights to manage, interpret or cope with the information, and allow them to take control of their experience.

Discuss online bullying

Make sure that they know online bullying is not ok, and can be dealt with. Try and talk to them about it; they may not want to straightaway but let them know that you are there. As a solution, it may be tempting to suggest they stop using their phone, but this could feel like a punishment. Instead offer practical tips so they can take control of the situation, such as showing them how to block unwanted calls and messages, and how to report bullying.

Ask their permission

You should ask their permission before sharing photos of them. By doing this, not only are you indicating that you value them and their privacy, but it can help lead into conversations about potential issues of sharing information without consent: how easy it is to share, how hard it is to remove images once they are there, and how it can have hurtful consequences.

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