

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE ON LINE

The latest Ofcom research has shown that 91% of 5-15 year olds live in a household with internet access and over a third of 3-4 year olds are now accessing the internet in their homes.

As parents and Nursery practitioners responsible for children's safety, we want our children and those we look after, to be healthy and happy, and to develop both physically and mentally. Above all, we want children to be safe.

Children learn through exploration and natural curiosity, and it is part of our job as parents and practitioners to encourage that. However, as our children grow up, develop and discover new experiences, we must take more and different steps to ensure their safety.

Until their understanding and instincts catch up with their curiosity, children need to be protected from everyday dangers – whether crossing the road, in and around the home or talking to new people they meet.

They're growing up fast

Depending on the age of your child, they may not have yet discovered computers, smartphones or tablets, unless it's just pressing the buttons! Alternatively, they may already be using certain trusted websites and apps.

By the time they are older, they will probably already be 'online veterans' who know their way around the internet, apps, games, downloading and social networking with ease. But they almost certainly don't have the life-experience and wisdom to handle the situations they may encounter.

Where do I start?

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

Should I set rules?

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

How much time is too much time?

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

Are there tools to help?

There are free parental controls and filters available to help you set safer boundaries, but you will usually be required to set them up. They are a good starting point but it is important to

recognise that they are not 100% effective. They work best in combination with parental supervision and engagement, to help your children understand how to stay safe online.

If you have a family computer or tablet, set the homepage to an appropriate website such as Cbeebies. Buy or download only apps, games, online TV and films which have age ratings, which you should check before allowing your child to play with or watch them.

How can I supervise my child?

Placing your computer or laptop in a busy part of the house e.g. the living room or kitchen can be helpful. This can make it easier for you to be involved in their technology use. But remember, the internet can be accessed from several portable devices, for example smartphones, iPod Touch, games consoles and tablets. Portable devices may allow you to ensure your children are using them where you can see them and your children can still be supervised.

Make sure devices like your mobile, tablet or laptop are out of reach. Set up passwords/PINS and make sure you keep these details to yourself.

What advice can I give my child?

Education is the best tool that a child can have, so discuss with your child the importance of telling an adult immediately if someone, or something, upsets them online. Make sure that your children know that they can come and talk to you (without necessarily getting into trouble) if they see anything that worries them on the internet and encourage them to feel confident enough to do so.

Younger users may be distracted by advertising and pop ups and with just a couple of clicks, or a spelling mistake, may find themselves on a different website. Children are naturally curious and will innately push boundaries. Bookmarking sites or creating a 'favourites' list is a simple way to help your children find the content they want without having to search the internet for it.

And remember, share your technology rules with grandparents, babysitters and your child's friends' parents so that they know what to do when looking after your child.