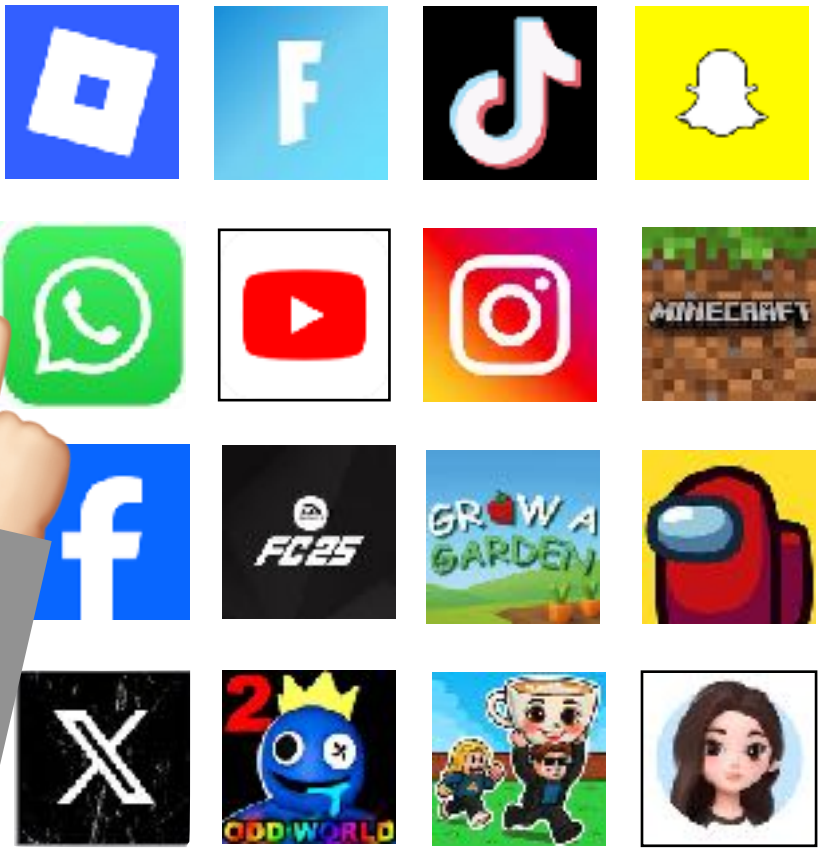
A Guide to
Digital Parenthood

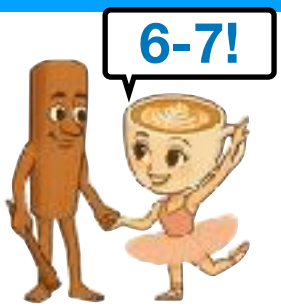
Helping your child grow up safe, happy and confident online



A guide for families of children aged 4–11

Updated September 2026

We live in “The Age of the Screen.”



Screens are everywhere in children's lives. They shape the jokes they tell, the words they use, the friendships they make, and how they see themselves. For most children growing up today, digital life isn't separate from real life. It is real life.

According to Ofcom, almost all children aged 5 to 7 are already using the internet regularly before they've even started school, usually on a family phone or tablet at home. That's not a crisis. But it is a reason to pay attention.

You don't need to be a tech expert to raise a child well in a digital world. You just need to understand enough to have honest conversations, spot the warning signs, and help your child build good habits early. That's what this guide is for.

Every family is different, every child is different, and there's no perfect way to do this. What matters is that you're here, asking the right questions.

We'll look at some of the risks, yes. But we'll also look at what a healthy, happy relationship with technology actually looks like and how you can help your family get there.

Did you know?

Children aged 5–7 spend an average of 1–2 hours a day on screens. By Key Stage 2 that rises to 2–3 hours. Many children exceed recommended limits, especially when gaming and passive video-watching are included. (Ofcom, Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes)

Screens, time, and the stuff that actually matters

The question worth asking: “Is this helping my child grow, or just keeping them busy?”

The longer you hold off on giving your child a smartphone and social media, the better it is for their mental health, sleep, and ability to concentrate. This isn't about being strict. It's about buying their developing brain more time before handing it something engineered to be impossible to put down.

The UK government now agrees. New official guidance says under-twos should avoid screens almost entirely. Two-to-fives should have no more than an hour a day and not at mealtimes or before bed. Fast-paced, scrolling-style video is singled out as the most damaging type of screen time at any age, linked to shorter attention spans and slower language development.

But the clock isn't really the point. What your child is doing matters more than how long they're doing it. Two hours on a creative app is not the same as two hours of TikTok with autoplay running.

These social media platforms are engineered to hold attention, and the research is catching up with what many parents already suspected. A 2024 review of 71 studies, covering nearly 100,000 people, found that heavy short-form video use was linked to shorter attention spans, weaker impulse control, and higher rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Think about the difference between these two evenings. Your child plays a game with you, or watches something together and you chat about it after. Or: they're upstairs, headphones in, alone, autoplay going. Same amount of time. Very different experience.
The first one, you're part of it. The second one, nobody is.

Did you know?

The average person globally now spends over 6 hours and 40 minutes a day on internet-connected screens. Children are not immune to this pull — and the apps they use are designed by the same companies.

What does your child learn in school?

Schools do a great job of teaching your children about online safety. Ask any primary school child about strangers online, and they'll give you the right answer. The problem is that knowing something and doing something are very different things. Schools, broadly speaking, teach the Four Cs when it comes to online risk. It's worth knowing as it gives you a shared language with your child's teacher and a useful way to think about what your family needs to talk about at home.

Content: what they see

Harmful, upsetting or age-inappropriate material, including fake news, AI-generated images, and content promoting self-harm, racism or extreme views. Adult YouTube is 15× more popular with children than YouTube Kids.

Contact: who reaches them

Who can talk to your child, and who they can reach. This covers online bullying, grooming, sexual harassment, and AI companion bots designed to form 'relationships' with young people.

Conduct: how they behave

What your child does online, including how they treat others and how they present themselves. Sharing images, managing their digital footprint, and copyright all fall here.

Contract – what they agree to

Children click 'I agree' without reading terms. This covers in-app purchases, phishing, advertising that looks like content, and online gambling mechanics in games.

Children learn by watching. They see adults scrolling on phones at the dinner table, laughing at videos, and posting on social media, and they want in. Which means the most powerful online safety lesson you can give your child doesn't come from a teacher or a worksheet. It comes from you.

Did you know?

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reported a significant rise in AI-generated harmful imagery during 2024. This is one reason why unmonitored AI access carries real risks, even for young children who stumble on it by accident.

2026 has been a big year for children's online safety.

Social media is being banned for under-16s.

By spring 2027, children under 16 will be legally blocked from TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, and X. WhatsApp and other messaging apps are not included in the ban. Platforms will have to verify every new user's age through ID checks, facial scanning, or face fines of up to 10% of their global revenue. That's a number large enough to make even the biggest tech companies pay attention.

Will it be perfect? No.

Determined teenagers will find workarounds, just as they do now. But for the first time, the legal responsibility sits with the platforms, not with you. If a child under 16 gets onto TikTok after spring 2027, that's TikTok's failure, not a parenting one.

What this means for your child's school.

Schools are already ahead of this. From September 2026, updated national safeguarding guidance requires every school in England to have policies covering AI-generated images, deepfakes, and AI companion apps. Phones are banned in classrooms by law. Online safety is taught throughout the year, not just as a one-off lesson.

If anything worries you about what your child is seeing or doing online, your first call should be to the school. The class teacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead can help, and they're used to these conversations.

Did you know?

Nine out of ten parents who responded to the government consultation supported the ban. Around two-thirds of young people agreed that younger children should be kept off at least some platforms.

Make sure you understand the age ratings and risks, before you say yes to an app

There are a handful of apps and games that constantly cause issues, and the peer pressure to use these apps can be enormous. Most of the apps your child wants to use were not built for them. They were built for adults, monetised through advertising and in-app purchases, and designed to keep users scrolling for as long as possible. Knowing what's on each platform and what the age ratings actually mean is a good place to start.

📱 Snapchat (Age: 13+)

Main Risks: Messages and photos can disappear, encouraging risky behaviour. Children may receive messages from strangers. “Snap Map” can share a child’s live location. Group chats can lead to bullying or pressure. Filters and appearance tools can affect self-esteem. Highly addictive.

🎮 Fortnite (Age: 12+ PEGI, 12+ App Store)

Main Risks: Voice chat means children may hear bad language or speak to strangers. Some game modes include frightening or aggressive content. In-game purchases can become expensive. Children may feel pressure to spend money on skins or battle passes. Long gaming sessions can affect sleep and mood.

▶️ YouTube (Age: 13+)

Main Risks: Autoplay and recommendations can quickly lead to unsuitable videos. Some videos contain misinformation, scams or fake “life hacks”. Children may copy dangerous trends or challenges. Advertising and influencer content can be misleading. Excessive viewing can reduce sleep and concentration.

🎮 Roblox (Age: Parental Guidance Recommended PEGI, 12+ App Store)

Main Risks: Not one game but millions. Some games contain frightening or inappropriate themes. Chat features can expose children to strangers. User-created games vary greatly in quality and safety. Scams involving free Robux are common. Children may spend large amounts on virtual items.

Did you know?

British children spend an average of 127 minutes a day on TikTok — more than children in any other country. YouTube is the most-used online service for children aged 5–7, and adult YouTube is fifteen times more popular with children than YouTube Kids. (Ofcom, 2024)

Apps and games are deliberately built to make stopping hard.

📱 Instagram (Age: 13+)

Main Risks: Instagram now defaults to Teen Accounts for under-18s, but only if your child is using their real age. Strong focus on appearance and popularity, “Looksmaxxing”. Reels can become addictive and difficult to stop watching. Children may compare themselves to unrealistic lifestyles or edited images. Strangers can contact children through direct messages. Fake giveaways and scams are common.

💬 WhatsApp (Age: 13+)

Main Risks: Widely used by older primary children. Group chats can become overwhelming or upsetting. Children may receive unkind messages or be excluded. Scams and fake messages are increasingly common. Images and messages can spread quickly between groups. Children may feel pressure to reply instantly.

🎮 Minecraft (Age: 7+ PEGI)

Main Risks: Although it is creative, imaginative, and genuinely good fun, Minecraft's terms of service require parental consent for users under 13. Online multiplayer servers may expose children to strangers. Some servers include inappropriate language or behaviour. Long play sessions can affect sleep and routines. YouTube content linked to Minecraft can sometimes be unsuitable.

📱 TikTok (Age: 13+)

Main Risks: Highly addictive, endless scrolling. Algorithms can quickly push extreme or upsetting content. Viral challenges may encourage risky behaviour. Misinformation and AI-generated fake videos are common. Children may encounter inappropriate language or themes. Ofcom data shows 30% of five-to-seven-year-olds use it despite the 13+ age rule.

Did you know?

Around 40% of Roblox users are under the age of 13, yet researchers and child safety organisations have repeatedly found that children can still encounter strangers, sexual language and inappropriate content through chat features and user-created games. (The Guardian, 2026)

Parent tips for manageing devices at home

Children learn by copying, not listening

Young children don't do what you tell them. They do what they see you do. If your phone comes to the dinner table, theirs will too. If you scroll during quiet moments, they learn that filling silence with a screen is normal. The most powerful online safety lesson you can give a young child isn't a conversation about staying safe, it's watching you put your own phone down.

Where devices live matters: Simple bedtime rules that help

1. No screens in bedrooms, bedrooms are for rest, not scrolling. Devices live in shared spaces only. Devices in bedrooms, especially at night, are consistently linked to poorer sleep, lower mood and more conflict.
2. No devices one hour before bed. Screens stimulate the brain, delay sleep and make emotions harder to manage the next day.
3. Replace that hour with a story, a conversation or a calm routine. This is one of the strongest protective habits you can build.

"Phone jail" at mealtimes

A phone jail is just a box, a basket or a drawer where all devices go at mealtimes. No one checks their phone. It works because it removes the decision every time. Meals are where children learn to take turns in conversation, read social cues and use language. Thirty minutes of screen-free eating together is worth more than you might think.

Group chats: a gentle word of warning

If and when your child gets a phone, group chats can cause real problems — especially large class chats. Try to keep them to close friends only, in groups of five or six maximum.

Did you know?

Almost a third of children who started Reception last year could not use books correctly, with some trying to swipe or tap the pages like a smartphone. (National Literacy Trust survey, 2026)

Set up Parent controls on devices & apps

You are not failing, the tech is designed to win

Apps and games are deliberately built to make stopping hard. They reduce natural stopping points, trigger reward responses in the brain, and create what researchers call the “endless scroll”. When your child has a meltdown at switch-off time, that’s not bad parenting or bad behaviour. It’s a developing brain meeting a product engineered by very clever adults.

Let the device do the stopping

Use parental controls and built-in screen time limits so the device switches off, not you. When there’s nothing left to argue about, the argument disappears.

Useful links

Here are highly recommended, official online safety resources for parents. These links offer practical advice on setting up parental controls, discussing digital habits, and understanding current apps.

UK Safer Internet Centre: Provides parent-friendly advice on privacy settings, reporting online issues, and starting conversations about internet use.

Internet Matters: A comprehensive portal offering step-by-step guides on setting up broadband and device controls to protect children and family agreements.

Childnet: Offers practical toolkits and guidance for parents, including advice on gaming and social media trends

NSPCC Online Safety: Essential resources on preventing online abuse, managing compulsive device use, and talking to children about what they see online.

Common Sense Media: Expert reviews and age ratings for apps, games, and streaming services to help you make informed choices before letting your child download them.

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AI is everywhere. What do you need to know?

Generative AI: the age limit is 13

Most children aged 10 and above have encountered generative AI, apps like ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot or Grok. Almost all of these carry a minimum age requirement of 13. Some primary-age children are accessing them anyway, often because they are already on family devices.

Companion bots: a newer and bigger concern

Companion bots are different from question-answering AI. Apps like Character.AI, Replika and Nomi are built not to answer questions, but to form what feels like a friendship. They use your name, remember past conversations, and are designed to feel like a real relationship.

They are emotionally compelling in ways that other technology isn't, and primary-age children are already finding and using them.

What to do

- Check whether your child has downloaded any chatbots or AI apps
- Search app names you don't recognise; your school's teacher can help
- Have a calm conversation about what these apps do and don't do
- Tell your child that talking to you about anything they see online will never get them into trouble

Gemini

ChatGPT

Copilot

Meta (WhatsApp)

My AI (Snapchat)

Grok

Dola

Character.AI

Replika

Did you know?

The Internet Watch Foundation has reported a rise in AI-generated harmful content being created using publicly available AI tools. This is not about blaming technology — it's about understanding that unsupervised AI access carries real and growing risks for children. *Ofcom consistently finds that children who see upsetting content are less likely to tell an adult if they worry they'll lose access to their devices. Reassurance matters more than rules.*

AI images. It's more serious than you think.

Free AI apps that can turn a real photo into a fake or even explicit image. This AI technology is already on many children's phones. Schools aren't bracing for this. They're already dealing with it in primary and secondary schools.

From September 2026, every school in England must treat AI-generated images and deepfakes the same way they treat grooming. That tells you how serious this has become.

Children don't need to go looking for it. They might be sent something by another child via WhatsApp, stumble across it on YouTube, or find out later that someone used a photo of them without their knowledge. Photos from school websites and family social media accounts have already been used this way.

Start by having this conversation at home.

📸 **Talk about photos.** Who has them, where they go, and what your family rules are. Anything posted publicly can be saved and misused, including an innocent school photo.

🗣️ **Tell your child they won't be in trouble.** If anyone sends them something upsetting, or asks them to share an image, they come to you first. Make sure they know this now, not after it happens.

🔒 **Check privacy settings today.** Set every account to private. Remove photos that show a school uniform, name badges, or anything that identifies where your child goes to school.

Did you know?

The UK Online Harms Early Warning Working Group found that school websites were being used as sources for AI image manipulation. Most schools are already reviewing what photos they publish publicly as a result.

Ten things to do this week

1. Ask your child what they do online and really listen.
2. Check their top three most-used apps. Do you know what they are?
3. Turn on screen time limits. It takes ten minutes; your school can help.
4. Put devices out of reach an hour before bed.
5. Create a family agreement about screen use (see internetmatters.org).
6. Remove TVs and devices from bedrooms.
7. Check any games your child plays, are parental controls on, and chat turned off?
8. Have one screen-free meal together this week.
9. If your child sees something upsetting, listen first. Reassure them they're not in trouble.
10. Reach out to the school if anything worries you. We're here to help.

Your presence is more powerful than any app.

Speak to us

If anything worries you about your child's online life, please talk to us. You can speak to your child's class teacher or the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead at any time. You don't need to have all the answers, you just need to ask.