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Welcome to the July 2026 edition of Safe and Smart.

This half-term we're looking at 3 updates:

Firstly, we'll be taking a brief look at two new reports. The first is from Ofcom which gives us an insight into the online lives of children within age groups. The second is from Internet Matters looking at the online lives of vulnerable children. Both of these reports are useful, with the summer holidays just around the corner we may have a little more time to digest some of the facts and advice to help our children.

Then we'll be covering a newish website that seems to be gaining traction, but also comes with very significant concerns for under 18's.

Finally we'll take a look at a brilliant resource from Internet Matters talking about 'layer up for online safety', which will help with taking out some of the frustration of setting up filters, devices, app settings etc.



Two recent reports, one from Ofcom and one from Internet Matters, give us a useful snapshot of the online lives of children, and the message from both is similar: being online is now a normal part of childhood. Children use technology to learn, relax, play, create, socialise and to feel connected.

Ofcom found that almost all 8 to 17 year olds are online, and for many children, including children with additional needs, the online world can be a really positive space. The Internet Matters report reminds us that for some children with additional needs, online spaces can be especially important for friendship, confidence, creativity and belonging.

But both reports also remind us that children can come across things online that are upsetting, confusing or harmful.

This might happen through social media, video apps, gaming, group chats, livestreams or AI tools. I doubt any of this will be new to you, but what do these reports tell us about the online lives of children in 2026?

Younger Children

Ofcom's research shows that many children are online from a young age. By the age of 6 or 7, more than 9 in 10 children are already going online, usually to watch videos, play games or use apps.

Content is a big concern for parents, but for these younger children the main issue is not that they are deliberately looking for harmful content, it's more likely they stumble across things through video recommendations, adverts, gaming chat (if this is enabled), search results or even older siblings' or parents' devices.



Did you know?

- Almost all 8 to 17 year olds are now online.
- By the age of 6 or 7, more than 9 in 10 children are already going online.
- Mobile phone ownership rises sharply between age 10 and 11, from 56% to 83%.

So at this age, children need simple, repeated messages:

“Come and tell me if you see anything that makes you feel worried, confused or uncomfortable.”

“Don't click on things just because they pop up.”

“Not everything online is made for children.”

“Before you download, buy or message, ask me first.”

This is also a good age to set up the basics: parental controls, child profiles, app store restrictions, privacy settings and clear rules about where and when devices are used. For example, it is much easier to support a younger child if tablets and

phones are used in family spaces rather than bedrooms.

Ages 8 to 10

Children in this age group are becoming confident users of technology, but that doesn't always mean they understand what they're seeing. Ofcom found that watching videos and gaming are two of the most common online activities for children, and this is the age where parents may start hearing phrases such as “everyone else has it” or “I'm the only one not allowed.”

This can be difficult, especially when children want access to apps, games or platforms that are designed for older users. A useful approach is to move away from a simple yes or no and talk about readiness, for example:



- “Who can contact you on this game?”
- “What would you do if someone was unkind?”
- “Can you show me how to block or report?”
- “Do you know what information you should keep private?”

It's also worth watching how your child behaves after being online. Are they calm and happy, or irritable, secretive or upset?

Their behaviour afterwards can tell you a lot about whether the app, game or platform is right for them at that age. For example, some children are totally fine after playing fast-paced games, while other children might be hyper, frustrated or upset that they've had to come off the game.

Ages 10 to 12



This is often the age when mobile phone ownership increases sharply, particularly as children prepare for the move from primary to secondary school. Ofcom found that phone ownership rises from 56% at age 10 to 83% at age 11, which is a big jump.

It can be a tricky age. Emotionally, children are still quite young, but they're often being given devices and access to spaces where they can communicate more freely with others. They're becoming more confident online and therefore there is the risk of greater exposure to content and contact harms.

One important point from the report is that many children aged 8 to 12 are using services that have a minimum age of 13. They found that 90% of 8 to 12 year olds said they had used at least one online service with a minimum age of 13 or above.



Did you know?

- Around 7 in 10 children aged 11 to 17 recalled seeing at least one type of harmful content online in the previous four weeks when prompted with examples.
- Over half of 8 to 17 year olds said they had used AI, rising to around two-thirds of 16 to 17 year olds.

This doesn't mean every child is immediately at risk, and some services do have supervised options (such as YouTube), but it is a useful reminder that popularity does not automatically mean age-appropriate. Just because “everyone else is on it” does not mean that a child is ready for it, that’s for individual parents to determine.

For this age group, try to agree a few clear expectations before problems arise:

- No devices overnight in bedrooms.
- Privacy settings should be checked together.
- Friend or contact lists should be people they know in real life, especially for younger children.

Children should know how to block, report and take screenshots if something goes wrong, and they should be reassured that telling you will not automatically mean they lose their device.

That last point is a really big one with children. If they think they will be punished or disconnected every time they tell an adult, they may stay silent when they need help the most.

Ages 11 to 13

This is the age where children may become more exposed to wider online content. Ofcom found that when 11 to 17 year olds were prompted with a list of harmful content types, around 7 in 10 recalled seeing at least one type in the previous four weeks. Bullying and hateful content were among the most commonly reported issues.

For parents, it's useful to remember that harmful content is not always something dramatic or obvious, but it can be, such as a cruel comment thread, a video encouraging unhealthy body image, a dangerous challenge, violent content, misogynistic content, racism, homophobia, or content that promotes self-harm or eating disorders.



Did you know?

- Around 1 in 10 children who had used AI said they had used it as someone to talk to or “as a friend”.
- Children with additional needs spend around 26 hours a week online, about 5 hours more than their peers.

Children may not always describe it as “harmful”. They may say things like:

- “It was weird.”
- “It made me feel uncomfortable.”
- “It keeps coming up.”
- “Everyone is sharing it.”
- “I just scrolled past it.”

A good conversation starter is:

“Have you seen anything recently online that you wish you hadn't seen?”

This is less confrontational than “Are you safe online?” and may give your child an easier way into the conversation.

It's also worth showing children how to use the tools available to them. Blocking, muting, reporting and using “not interested” or “hide” features can make a difference to what they see. These tools are not perfect, but children need to know they exist and how to use them.

Ages 13 to 15

For teenagers, one of the big issues is not just what they are seeing, but how long they are spending online. You could say the same for all age groups, but this is where it starts to rise sharply.

Ofcom found that 37% of 8 to 17 year olds felt their screen time was too high, and 65% of 13 to 17 year olds had actively tried to manage their time online. This is a helpful reminder that teenagers are not always ignoring advice. Many know their phones can affect their sleep, concentration and mood.

But social media apps in particular are designed to keep attention. Infinite scroll, autoplay, streaks, notifications and personalised recommendations can make it hard to stop.

Rather than simply saying “get off your phone,” it may be more helpful to say:

- “What makes it hard to stop?”
- “Which app takes up most of your time?”
- “How do you feel after using it?”
- “Would turning off notifications help?”



“Should we agree a charging place outside your bedroom?”

The aim is to help children notice how technology affects them. Screen time is not just about minutes and hours. It is also about mood, sleep, friendships, schoolwork and family life.

Ages 15 to 17

Older teenagers are spending more time online and using a wider range of services. Ofcom found that AI tools are becoming a normal part of online life, especially for teenagers. Over half of 8 to 17 year olds said they had used AI, rising to two-thirds of 16 to 17 year olds.

Many children use AI for learning, creativity or everyday tasks, but some children also use AI as someone to talk to. Ofcom found that around 1 in 10 children who had used AI said they had used it as someone to talk to or “as a friend”.



AI chatbots can be helpful, but they are not trusted adults. Chatbots can give incorrect advice, they may not understand the full situation, and they should not replace real support from parents, carers, school staff or other trusted adults.

A simple message for teenagers is:

“AI can help with ideas, but it should not be the only place you go for advice when something really matters.”

Parents may also notice more age checks on some apps and platforms, particularly as online safety legislation continues to develop worldwide. Ofcom found that more children are being asked to prove their age, and some teenagers may also know about ways to get around restrictions, such as VPNs.

Did you know?



- Internet Matters found that children with additional needs can experience more of the good and the bad of online life: online spaces can support friendship, confidence and belonging, but these children may also need extra support with boundaries, contact, gaming, spending and harmful content.

This is another reason why conversation matters. Technical controls can help, but they work best alongside trust, boundaries and regular check-ins.

Children with Additional Needs

The Internet Matters report focuses on children with additional needs, and it's a very important reminder that online life can be both especially positive and especially challenging for these children.

For some children with additional needs, online spaces can provide friendship, confidence, creativity and a sense of belonging. Gaming, communities, videos and creative tools may help them connect with others who share their interests.

But the report also shows that they may face greater risks online. Internet Matters found that children with additional needs spend around 26 hours a week online, which is about 5 hours more than their peers. They may also find it harder to regulate their time, be more affected by online conflict, or be more vulnerable to bullying, unwanted contact, harmful content or spending money in games and apps.

For parents, the key message is not to remove something that may be very important to the child, but to support it carefully. This might mean:

- Having visual or predictable routines around device use;
- Giving warnings before switching off, rather than sudden removal;
- Checking game settings, chat settings and spending controls;
- Agreeing breaks based on the child's needs;
- Talking about online friendships in the same way you would talk about offline friendships;
- Working with school if online issues are affecting sleep, mood, attendance or learning.

The report also includes a really important point from a parent: if children think they will lose access, they may not tell you what is happening. Children need to know they can ask for help without being blamed.



Unsure where to start?

Take a look at Internet Matters My Family's Digital Toolkit to get personalised advice according to the age of your child and the devices they use:

<https://www.internetmatters.org/digital-family-toolkit/>



What is Omoggle?

You may have heard of Omegle, the random video chat website which was very popular with children and young people for many years before it was forced to close by a US judge in 2023. A newer site called Omoggle is now getting attention, and it is something parents should be aware of.

Omoggle is a website, not a normal app from an app store, which means children may be able to access it through a web browser on a phone, tablet, laptop or computer. It connects users with random strangers through live webcam. The added twist is that it also uses AI-style face scanning to rate people's appearance and decide who "wins" against the other person.

This is linked to a trend called "mogging" and "looksmaxxing". In simple terms, this is an online culture where people compare, rank and judge appearance. On Omoggle, two users can be placed into a live video "battle" where their faces are scanned and scored. One person is then labelled the winner and the other the loser.

For children and teenagers, this is worrying for two reasons. Firstly, it involves live video contact with strangers. Secondly, it turns appearance into a public competition potentially leading to issues such as low self-esteem.

What are the age requirements?

Omoggle is reported to be for over-18s, however users are simply asked to confirm they are over 18. There does not appear to be a proper age verification process, such as uploading ID or going through a more robust age check. In other



words, the site may say it's for adults, but that does not necessarily stop a child from entering.

Can anyone just use it?

Yes, the barrier to entry is very weak. If a child can find the website, allow camera and microphone access, and click to say they are over 18, they may be able to use it.

It is also important to remember that because it is a website, parents may not see an app icon on the phone. Looking for installed apps is useful, but it is not enough. Browser history, search history, camera permissions and general conversations with your child are just as important.



What is Omoggle?

What are the risks?

The first risk is contact with strangers. Random webcam sites are unpredictable. Your child does not know who will appear on the other side of the screen. They could be matched with another young person, but they could also be matched with an adult.

Then we have the risk of exposure to inappropriate or sexual content. This was one of the major concerns with older random video chat sites, of which there have been and still are, many. The problem with live webcam platforms is that harm can happen instantly, before moderation or reporting tools have time to do anything.

The third risk is grooming or manipulation. If a stranger starts a conversation, asks for personal information, encourages a child to move to another app, or asks them to do something on camera, this can quickly become a safeguarding concern.

And then there's the risk of recording and sharing. Children may think a live video disappears when the chat ends, but someone on the other side could record the screen. This means a child's face, reaction, voice or anything they do on camera could be saved and shared elsewhere.

Then we've got the potential impact on self-esteem. Many children and teenagers are already under pressure about how they look. A website that scans their face, gives them a score and compares them with others could be very upsetting, especially for children who are anxious, vulnerable or already struggling with confidence.

And finally the culture around it. Some of the language linked to moggling and looksmaxxing comes from online spaces which can promote unhealthy views about appearance, masculinity, women and self-worth. Not every child who hears these terms will understand that background.

What should parents do?

If you find that your child has used a site such as Omoggle, natural reactions can include anger or shock which, more often than not, your child may shut the conversation down. As difficult as it can be sometimes, a calmer approach is more likely to help.





What is Omoggle?

You could say:

- “I’ve heard about a website called Omoggle. Have people at school mentioned it?”. (Be careful with this one, if your child hasn't heard of it they may become curious. It may be more beneficial to talk about anonymous video chat sites in general).
- “What do you think it is?”
- “Have you seen videos of people using it?”
- “Why do you think people find it funny or interesting?”
- “Do you think it would feel nice or horrible to have your appearance scored by strangers?”



These questions are better than starting with, “You’re not using that, are you?” Children are much more likely to talk when they feel we are curious rather than accusing them.

It is also worth reminding children of a few simple rules:

Never go on live webcam with strangers. Never allow camera or microphone access to a site unless an adult knows about it.

Never share your name, school, location, age, social media accounts or other personal information.

If something makes you feel uncomfortable, leave straight away and tell an adult.

If someone asks you to move to another app, keep it secret, or do something on camera, that is a warning sign.

If you are certain that your child has been on a video chat site such as Omoggle, ask them what happened, who they spoke to, whether anything inappropriate appeared, whether they shared any personal information, and whether they think they were recorded.

If they saw something sexual, frightening or abusive, reassure them that they are not in trouble. If there has been sexual communication, grooming, threats, blackmail or a request for images, this should be reported. You can contact the school safeguarding lead for advice, and in more serious cases report to the police.

The most important message for children is, “You can always tell me. I might be worried, but I will help you.”

Layer Up for Online Safety

After reading about children's online lives, harmful content, AI tools, gaming, social media and sites such as Omoggle, it's completely understandable to feel a little overwhelmed.

One of the most common questions parents ask is: "What should I actually set up?", and that's not always easy to answer because every child is different, every device is different, and every app seems to have its own settings. It can feel frustrating, especially when you just want to do the right thing but you're not sure where to start.

Internet Matters have created a really useful guide called 'Layer up for online safety', and it is really good because it doesn't suggest that parents have to do everything at once. It also doesn't describe parental controls as a way to stop children from exploring online.

The idea is simple: rather than looking for one perfect setting, think about online safety in layers and at the centre is your child.

This is the most important part of the guide. The starting point is not the device, the broadband router or the latest app. The starting point is your child, for example:



- How old are they?
- How confident are they online?
- Are they impulsive?
- Do they get upset easily after gaming?
Are they likely to click on pop-ups?
- Do they understand privacy?
- Are they ready for group chats or social media?
- Do they need extra support because of age, maturity or additional needs?

Parental controls should fit the child, not the other way around. They will also need to change over time. What is right for an 8 year old will not be the same as what is right for a 15 year old. To summarise the guide:



Layer 1: Network Controls



This is a good place to start. Network controls are the settings linked to your home broadband or your child's mobile network. They can help filter adult content and apply some basic age-based restrictions.

They're useful because they can give you a general safety baseline, especially at home, but they're not perfect. For example, they may not apply if your child uses mobile data, public Wi-Fi or someone else's Wi-Fi.

Layer 2: Device Controls



The next layer is the device itself. Phones, tablets, laptops and games consoles usually have built-in family or parental control settings.

These can help with things such as screen time, app downloads, purchases, privacy, location sharing and age-appropriate content.

These settings are useful because they can be adjusted as your child gets older and becomes more independent.



Layer 3: App and Platform Controls



The final layer is the app, game or platform your child is using. This is where you can often manage things such as who can contact your

child, who can see their profile, whether comments are allowed, what content is recommended, and how to block or report.

This is also a good opportunity to sit with your child and look at the settings together.

You could ask:

“Who can message you on this?”

“Can people you don’t know add you?”



“Can we check your privacy settings together?”

“Where is the block or report button?”

As the guide states, all of this isn’t about doing everything at once and becoming confused or frustrated, it’s about layering. Start with one layer, e.g. your broadband, then move onto the next layer.

Remember that all these layers help you set a really good baseline, parental controls are useful, but they are not a guarantee, so make sure your child knows what to do if something goes wrong. They need to know they can come to you, that they will be listened to.

Online safety can feel complicated, frustrating, but it becomes much more manageable when you break it down.

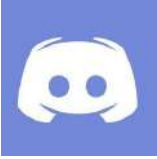






You can find the full ‘Layer Up for Online Safety’ guide from Internet Matters here:

<https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Layer-Up-for-Online-Safety-Internet-Matters-2026.pdf>

Common Apps

This is not an exhaustive list, but tends to be the more popular apps used by children and young people.

Age requirements are set within the terms and conditions of the app provider, don't be confused by ratings in the app stores which can be different.

App	Age	Comments
	13	Discord - is a voice, video and text chat app that's used by tens of millions of people aged 13+ to tap and hang out with communities or their friends. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	Instagram - is a photo and video sharing app where people can upload photos, videos and messages to share with others. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	Snapchat - is a very popular app that lets users swop pictures and videos (Snaps) with others which are meant to disappear after they are viewed. There is also a messaging feature. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	TikTok - is a social media app that allows users to create, watch and share short videos shot on mobile devices or webcams. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	Twitch - is where people come together to chat and interact live. Think YouTube, but it is live rather than pre-recorded. Parental settings can be found HERE .
	13	WhatsApp - is a messaging app which uses text, images, video and voice record features to connect with others. Parental settings can be found HERE
	18	Reddit - is a network of communities (called subreddits) where people can share information, their interests and hobbies. Reddit is an 18+ app, there are no parental controls.