ONLINE SAFETY

SAFE and SMART
Keeping children safe online
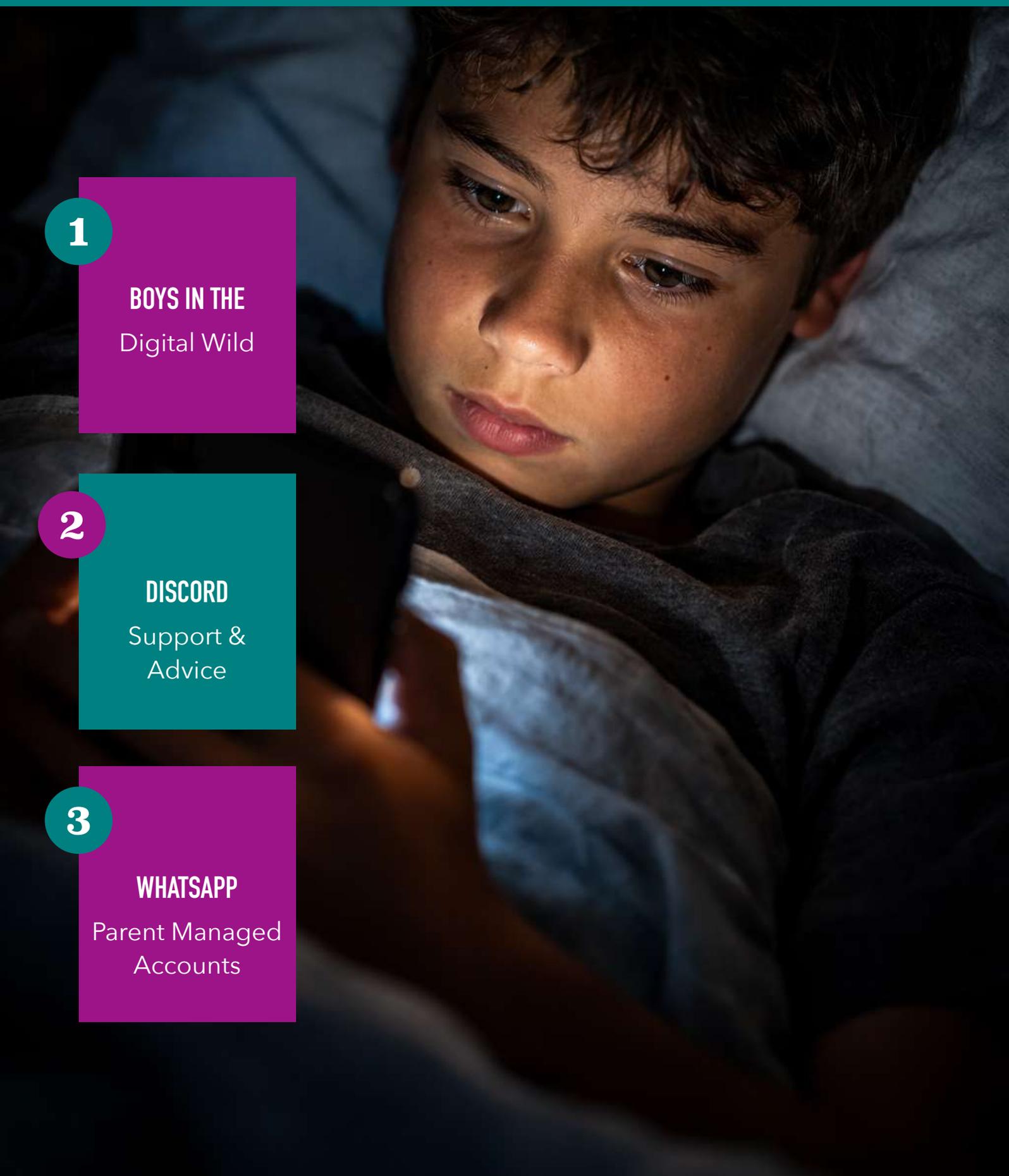
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A report in 2025 from Common Sense Media has explored how online culture can shape boys' views about identity, relationships, emotions and appearance.

The study was based on a nationally representative survey of 1,017 boys aged 11 to 17, carried out in July 2025, and looks at how social media, gaming, influencers and online communities can influence adolescent boys' development and well-being.

Common Sense Media uses the phrase "digital masculinity" to describe the ways masculinity is presented and negotiated online.

One of the headline findings is that nearly three-quarters of boys (73%) regularly see masculinity-related content online, with 23% experiencing high levels of exposure. The report says the most common themes include:

• Messages about making money (44%).
• Building muscle (39%).
• Fighting or weapons (35%).

Importantly, the research suggests that boys are not always going out looking for this material, the study found that much of it appears in their feeds through recommendation systems (algorithms), with platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram playing a key role in what boys are shown. The report also notes that some of this content can begin with apparently harmless themes such as self-improvement or dating advice before gradually moving towards narrower or more harmful ideas about gender, status and relationships.
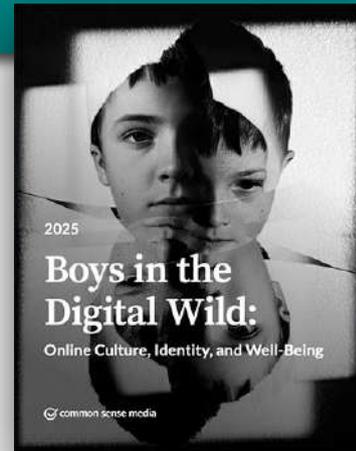
The research also highlights how widespread problematic stereotypes can be. More than two-thirds of boys (69%) said they regularly see masculinity content that promotes problematic gender stereotypes. Examples in the report include messages suggesting that girls only want to date certain types of boys, that girls use their looks to get what they want, or that boys are treated unfairly compared with girls.

Another important message for parents and carers is that this is not just about attitudes, it may also connect to well-being. The report found that more than one in four boys (26%) reported feeling lonely, and loneliness was higher among boys with greater exposure to masculinity-related content. Boys with low exposure reported loneliness at 18%, compared with 29% for moderate exposure and 30% for high exposure.

Self-esteem is another area of concern. The report found that boys with higher exposure to digital masculinity content were more likely to fall into the low self-esteem range. Among boys with high exposure, 14% were in the low self-esteem range, compared with 5% of boys with low exposure.

The report also found that boys with limited human support were far more likely to report

low self-esteem than those with strong support, underlining the importance of trusted relationships offline.

Many boys feel pressure to follow certain "unwritten rules" in order to avoid teasing or rejection. Nearly half (46%) said they felt they should not cry, show sadness or show fear.

Other common pressures included:

• Not acting "gay" or "feminine" (38%).
• Using humour instead of being serious about problems (35%).
• Always acting confident (35%).
• Not talking seriously about feelings with friends (29%).

Body image also features strongly in the report. Ninety-one percent of boys said they had seen online content about body image or appearance, and 24% said social media made them feel they should change how they look.

This is a helpful reminder that body image pressure is not just an issue for girls; boys can also be influenced by repeated messages about muscle, appearance and status.

The report is not entirely negative. Common Sense Media found that online spaces can also provide connection and belonging. For example:

• 54% of boys said social media or gaming often made them feel like they belong.
• 52% said they felt liked for who they are.
• 51% said they felt safe to say what they really think.

This matters, because it reminds us that the online world can offer both support and pressure at the same time.

For parents and carers, the key message is not to panic, but to stay curious. Boys may be absorbing repeated messages about what it means to "be a man" without actively searching for them, and those messages can shape how they think about emotions, relationships, appearance and self-worth.

Regular conversations about algorithms, influencers, stereotypes and healthy masculinity can help children and young people think more critically about what appears in their feed.

Report Link - https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2025-boys-in-the-digital-wild-report_for-web.pdf

Did you know?

- 91% of boys had seen body image or appearance content online.

- 73% of boys regularly see masculinity-related content online.

- 69% regularly encounter problematic gender stereotypes.

- 26% of boys reported feeling lonely.

What is Discord?

Used by many children and young people, Discord is a social media app used to chat with friends, join groups and take part in online communities. It can be a fun and positive space but it's important for parents and carers to understand how it works, why children use it, and what steps can help make their experience safer.

Age Requirements

In most countries the minimum age to use Discord is 13, although the minimum age is higher in some countries. Note: be careful relying on app ratings within app stores such as Apple and Google, these have been known to be wrong. Double check the T's & C's.

What's it all about?

It's a voice, video and text communication platform launched in 2015. Historically it was especially popular with gamers, but it's no longer just a gaming app. Many children and young people use it to chat with friends, join communities based on their interests, take part in group conversations, share images, watch streams and talk while playing games.

Discord is built around "servers", which are essentially group spaces made up of text and voice channels, similar in some ways to WhatsApp chat groups. Users can join private servers with friends or larger public communities found through invite links online.

For many young people, Discord is simply a place to socialise. It can be a positive way to stay in touch, especially for children who feel more comfortable connecting online around shared interests. It can also be valuable for some young people who face barriers offline, including some neurodivergent children, children in care, or those looking for community and belonging.

That said, there are some important concerns for parents and carers to be aware of.

Because Discord allows children to communicate through text, voice and live video, there is a risk of exposure to inappropriate language, sexual content, disturbing material or contact from people they don't know. Some servers are marked as

Did you know?

Discord isn't just for gaming. Many children and young people use it to chat, make voice calls, share images, join interest-based communities and spend time with friends.

18+ and contain adult content, while others may contain unsuitable material without being labelled properly. The private nature of group spaces can also make it harder for adults to see what is happening unless they are actively talking to their child about how they use the app.

There are other risks too. Discord's own 2024 transparency reporting included significant reports relating to harassment and bullying, with a smaller but still concerning proportion linked to child safety.

There are also money-related features to be aware of, such as Discord Nitro subscriptions. In addition, if location features are enabled on a device, Discord's "Nearby" feature can help users add people who are physically nearby, which is worth understanding before a child uses it.

Are there parental features?

Yes, Discord does have a number of safety and parental features. The main parent feature is **Family Center**, which allows a

parent or carer to link their Discord account to their teen's account. Once connected, parents can see a summary of recent activity from the last 7 days, such as how many people their teen has messaged or called, how many friends they have added, and how many servers they are actively participating in.

However, it is important to know that Family Center is voluntary and does not allow parents to read message content, see a complete archive, change friend lists or remove servers on their child's behalf.

Alongside Family Center, Discord also offers privacy and safety settings within the app itself. These include filtering inappropriate content in direct messages, blocking direct messages from server members, choosing who can add the user as a friend, blocking users, reporting concerns and filtering spam.

These are well worth exploring with your child so that the account is set up as safely as possible from the start.

Did you know?

Discord is built around servers. These are group spaces, similar to WhatsApp groups, which can be private, invite-only groups or much larger communities with thousands of members.

What about age assurance?

For some time Discord has used an internal 'age determination' system that looks at how long an account has existed, if there is a payment method on file, what types of servers the user is in and general patterns of account activity.

But there have been some important newer changes around age assurance and teen safety. Discord says that in the UK and Australia it has introduced age assurance and "teen-by-default" protections, partly to meet regulatory requirements. Users may be prompted to verify their age if they try to unblur sensitive content, turn off message requests, access age-restricted channels or change certain default safety settings. If a user is verified as under 18, some of those safer default settings stay in place and cannot be turned off.

Discord says its current methods can include face scanning or ID scanning, and that video selfies for facial age estimation are processed on-device, while identity documents are deleted quickly after age confirmation.

However, this area is still evolving. In February 2026, Discord said it had "got some things wrong" with its global age assurance plans and announced changes, including a delayed global launch until the second half of 2026.

So while age assurance is already relevant in places such as the UK, the broader worldwide rollout is not moving ahead in the way first expected.

We've put some tips and useful questions to ask your child on the following page, but in conclusion:

• Discord can be a fun, creative and social platform, and for many children it is simply a place to chat while gaming or spending time with friends.

• But, like many communication apps, its mix of private messaging, voice chat, large communities and user-generated content means there are real safeguarding considerations too.

• As ever, the most important safety feature is not just the technology — it is regular, calm and curious conversation with your child about what they are doing online and who they are doing it with.

TOP TIPS

Start with a conversation.
Ask your child what they use Discord for, who they talk to, and which servers they spend most time in.

Check settings together.
Look at privacy, direct messages, friend requests, spam filtering and sensitive content controls.

Talk about online friendships.
Remind children that people online are not always who they say they are, even when they seem friendly or share the same interests.

Encourage them to speak up.
Make sure your child knows they can come to you if something online makes them feel worried, uncomfortable or upset.

Use parental tools if appropriate.
Discord's Family Center can help parents and carers understand some recent activity and support ongoing conversations.

Focus on trust, not fear.
Children are more likely to ask for help when they know they will be listened to calmly and supported rather than blamed.

Links

Discord Safety News Hub
https://discord.com/safety-news

Discord Family Center
https://discord.com/safety-family-center

USEFUL QUESTIONS

What do you like about Discord?
This can help open the conversation in a positive and non-judgemental way.

Who do you usually talk to on there?
It is helpful to understand whether your child is mainly chatting with real-life friends, online friends or wider groups.

What kind of servers do you join?
Ask whether they are private groups, gaming communities or interest-based spaces.

Do you know everyone in those servers?
Children and young people may not always realise that large online communities can include strangers.

What would you do if someone made you feel uncomfortable?
This helps you talk about blocking, reporting and coming to a trusted adult for support.

Have you checked your privacy settings recently?
A good opportunity to explore direct messages, friend requests and safety tools together.

Would you tell me if something upset you online?
Reassure your child that they can always come to you, and that your first priority will be to help them.

WhatsApp - Parent Managed Accounts

In the second week of March Meta, owner of WhatsApp, made an announcement that no-one was expecting: parents of under 13's can now set up a managed WhatsApp account for their child.

These accounts come with strict new default settings and parental controls where the parent can decide:

• Who can contact the account.
• Which groups their children can join.
• Review messages from unknown contacts.
• Manage the account privacy settings.

As this has only recently been announced the update is rolling out gradually worldwide for both Android and iOS devices. For further information and details for how to set up a parent managed account follow this link:

https://faq.whatsapp.com/875902238256170/?cms_platform=android

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 then 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.