

Talking to your child about the internet and social media: YoungMinds' guide for parents

Have conversations from a young age

The internet offers huge opportunities. From a young age, children have the chance to learn, research, play games, have fun and connect with family who may not live nearby. But it's important to help them to use the online world in a way that's safe and positive for their mental health.

That's why it's good to have regular conversations about the internet and social media from a young age – it should be as ordinary as talking about the weather, the dog, or something you've watched on TV.

Make time for these conversations in your normal routine – so that could be while you're playing football, cooking, playing together, walking to school or going for a drive. You don't need to pry or quiz your child about every website they've seen, but checking in for a minute or two can make a huge difference.

Lead by example

Talk to your child about your own experience of the online world. Show them sites and apps that you like, and explain why you like them. Show them how to use the internet in a positive way – to research things, to do homework, to talk to family, and to find out about the world. That helps them to have a critical eye.

Children look to their parents as role models, so behave as you want your child to behave. If parents check their phones constantly, have them out at mealtimes, or play violent games in front of their children, then it's likely that their children might do the same.

You can also talk about your own less positive experiences online. If you feel irritated or pressured by the 'perfect' photos people share of their summer holidays on social media, then being open with your child about this might be a good thing. It could help them to understand that the 'perfect' images people share on social media shouldn't always be taken at face value, and encourage them to talk to you if they're struggling with something they see online.

Ask your child about the apps and websites they want to use

It can be easy to feel like the world's moved on since you were a child, and that you don't understand the latest technology, apps or social media that your child is using. But don't use this as an excuse not to get involved.

Ask your child to teach you about their favourite apps, games or websites, and to show you new ones that they want to try. This will give you an understanding of how they work, and will help you to have informal conversations around your child's internet use. Talk about what you like about them and whether you have any concerns about them.

If you want to know more about the apps or sites they're using, you can find out a lot by googling them. And if you think they aren't appropriate for their age, be ready to explain why you think this. Wherever possible, make it a joint decision, so they understand the reasons and will stick to it.

Set boundaries – but be realistic

The boundaries you set for internet use will depend on the age of your child. It's like teaching your child to cross the road: you'll make sure they hold your hand when they're very young, but as they grow older you want them to assess the risks and stay safe more independently.

Whatever age your child is, it's a good idea to sit down as a family and develop some rules about internet use. Try to agree how much time they will spend online. For example, you might want to agree that they shouldn't go online just before bed or use a phone/tablet during the night, as this may affect their sleep. You can often set timers on tablets or mobiles to limit internet use – but try to help your child manage it for themselves as well, and understand the positive effects of doing a variety of activities.

You can also set up parental controls to stop your child from accessing harmful content online, but be aware that your child may well learn how to get round these. That's why it's important to make sure your child is able to make good decisions for themselves.

Reassure them that they can always talk to you

Research suggests that most children are actually more cautious than adults online, and that most are good at navigating the internet safely. Often when they do come across upsetting content, it's not because they've gone looking for it but because they've found it by accident, or because someone's sent it to them.

Whatever happens, it's usually better to stay calm if you find they've come across something you don't approve of. Instead, reassure them that they can always talk to you. Tell them that you won't overreact if they tell you about something they've seen which is worrying them. You'd much rather that they talked to you, rather than keeping it to themselves.

Ask them if they've seen anything online that they're not comfortable with. e.g. nasty comments, sexual content, violent images. If they have, talk about how they feel having seen them, and how they can avoid seeing them again in future. If necessary, help them to report or block content they find disturbing.

Talk about personal information

Help your child to understand what's meant by personal information, so they can develop an awareness of why it's significant and why they should be cautious about sharing pictures of themselves or information online.

Some things for your child to know:

- What you put online stays online. Even things you delete can be saved or screenshotted – including those Snapchats meant for just one friend.
- Online strangers are still strangers. Forums and group chats can be a great way to connect over things you wouldn't say face to face, but don't feel pressured to share more than you feel comfortable with.
- It's easy to over-share on social media sites, especially if you forget who can see your profile. You can use Facebook's Friend settings to create lists so that only people you trust can see all your updates.
- Privacy is possible. Make sure you use social media site settings to protect your information. Don't hesitate to block anyone who makes you feel uncomfortable.

Talk about social media

Although most social media sites are officially 13+, most children sign up to at least one when they're much younger. Encourage them to be open with you if they're doing that, rather than keeping it a secret. And be aware that if they accept your Friend request on a social media account, it's very possible they have another one that they're not sharing with you.

Remind your child that every social media platform has privacy settings, and show them how to use them. Make sure your child understands about how to keep information private, and how to report or block things that aren't appropriate.

Show them the positives of social media – that it can help them be creative, have fun and talk to friends – but also help them to understand that people's online image may not reflect their lives offline, and the 'perfect' lives that people present probably aren't real.

Help your child to understand that they shouldn't feel the need to be available all the time on social media. It's okay to take a break, and you don't need to take part in every conversation.

Talk about gaming

It's easy to turn a blind eye to the games your child is playing, particularly if you didn't grow up playing the same sorts of games yourself. But it's worth checking PGI ratings, which have more detailed information than ratings for films. If your child wants to buy a game that looks like it's extremely violent or too old for them, then trust your judgement if you don't feel it's appropriate.

Talk about cyberbullying

Talk to your child about the fact that bullying isn't okay, whether it happens at school, at home or on the internet. If they're receiving nasty messages, or people are posting unwanted things about them, or they feel harassed, they should do something about it.

Encourage them to talk to you. Even if it seems like a small thing, it can really help to talk things through, and there may be ways to get it sorted out.

Make sure they understand how to block and report the people involved, and to use the privacy settings to limit what people can see on their profiles.

And be clear about taking responsibility about what they post from a young age. Help them understand the effect that what they post might have on others, and that they shouldn't say anything online that they wouldn't say in person. That means not writing nasty things about people you know – but it also means not posting abuse to celebrities, who are real people too.

Act on warning signs

You know your child well, and may well recognise it if something is wrong. It's important to act on the warning signs if you start to feel concerned. Talk to them openly, listen to what they have to say, don't rush to judgement, and make sure they know that you'll always be there for them.