

AUTISM AND THE INTERNET

A PARENT'S GUIDE

2020-2021



Autism and the Internet

Guidance for Parents 2020-21

Autism affects how a person makes sense of the world, and how they relate to and communicate with others. For young people on the spectrum the internet can provide real opportunities for social interaction and learning as it removes some of the challenges of face to face communication, however they are additionally vulnerable to risks online and young people on the spectrum may interpret this type of communication literally.

Young people on the Autism Spectrum may:

Take things literally. This means they may not be able to identify the hidden meaning behind certain phrases or even understand the difference between fact and fiction. This is a vital skill when using the internet, where anybody can post content and it can be difficult for your child to determine whether it's true or not, which may lead to be easily manipulated by others.

Have difficulty in interpreting social cues. Many young people on the autism spectrum prefer interacting over a computer than face to face. Using social networks safely, however, can be particularly difficult for them as they may struggle to interpret online chat or spot the signs of abuse.

Develop intense interests. It is common for people on the autism spectrum to develop intense interests or specialist knowledge in a particular topic as a way of helping them cope with everyday life. Areas of interest vary and depend on the person's preferences, but computers is one of the more common interests. This means that people will tend to spend significantly more time on computers than on other activities. This can increase their vulnerability to becoming involved in cybercrime and being exploited as a 'computer hacker' by others.

Many children on the autism spectrum struggle to interpret their own emotions and recognise risky situations. It's important that you set clear boundaries for them online and communicate these in a way they will understand, clearly setting out what is and what is not okay.

What can I do to help keep my child safe?

With the significant difficulties that Covid-19 has created our children are likely to have more opportunity to go online due to the disruption to our normal daily routines. As their parent or carer, you will understand what is normal for your child better than anyone else. The conversations you have with them and the boundaries you put in place will differ depending on how old they are, what their specific needs their technical proficiency and their vulnerabilities in social situations.

As with all children you can use technical tools, such as internet filters and parental controls, to improve your child's safety, however filters only provide protection for as long as sites within its boundaries are accessed. Abusers often persuade young people to leave the sanctuary of their parent's filtered system by joining an unfiltered chat-room.

When talking to children and young people on the autism spectrum about safety online there are some things you should emphasise.

You could:

Create a family contract. Decide as a family how your child can use the internet, when and for how long and write it down and/or draw pictures or use a social story. Clearly displaying rules and boundaries will make it easier for your child to keep themselves safe.

Show an interest and be actively involved in their online experiences. It can be fun to be online together and discovering the websites they enjoy and how they interact with others online and will help you to understand the risks they may face.

Make sure they know how to get help. Tell them that they should speak with you or a trusted adult if someone asks them to do something for them or if something upsets or confuses them. Agree that if they receive an attachment that they will talk to you before they open it.

In school

We use the Thinkuknow website at school as part of our Online Safety Training for pupils so you could explore this website together with your child to help develop your on-going discussion and highlight how to report to CEOP. Making it a normal part of everyday conversation will help you ensure they know how to get help.

Continue the conversation with your child and regularly talk about how and why they use the internet and who their online friends are. Frequent conversations on things like the difference between 'private' and 'public' can be really useful to help understanding.

If they use social media you should ensure that they know how to block other users and/or report to the service they use after telling you first. You can find out how to report to many popular social networks here.

- Our School Website has several Online Safety tools - Go to : <http://www.westlancs.lancs.sch.uk/> and navigate to >Parents and Carers > Online Safety> just above the blue button for Safeguarding Policy there are several links to Parental Support mechanisms including a free online training scheme from PACE for parents which takes about half an hour to complete.
- The Thinkuknow film, 'Know your friends with Josh and Sue' has been specially developed for young people with learning needs and explores a range of online issues in a format that is accessible for your child. You can watch the film here. www.thinkuknow.co.uk
- Mencap have produced a website which contains lots of helpful tips on how you can keep you and your child safe online.

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/about-us/our-projects/safesurfing>

If you have any questions or if we can help in any way please call and ask to speak with the Headteacher or Deputy Head Teacher