

# Keeping your children safe online

**As kids learn to swipe before they walk, we need to teach them to navigate the online world safely. Siobhan Mason discovers how to keep children safe in a virtual world**

**Do you worry what your child will find if they put 'doggy' into a search engine,** fear your tween will share an inappropriate photo or wonder who your game-obsessed teenager is really playing with?

Constant access to the internet can put the whole world (and everyone in it) in your children's hands and while that opens up infinite opportunities, it also comes with risks.

"The internet is an amazing tool," says Sue Wheeler, an independent safeguarding training practitioner who runs workshops on internet safety for parents and children in

Bath. "It just needs to be used in a safe environment where children understand what can happen if they don't take the right precautions."

The first step to creating that safe environment is to use the free parental controls offered by devices, games consoles and Internet Service Providers. These can filter the content your child sees, stop them downloading apps they're too young for, prevent them making in-app purchases and manage how long they spend online. The NSPCC have teamed up with O2 to offer a free helpline that

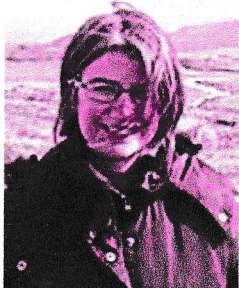
can talk you through the settings on any device or app, while video tutorials are also available through [www.saferinternet.org.uk](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk).

"There are programmes you can pay for that will monitor when your children are online, tell you what websites they're visiting, email you if they've tried to override your pin and let you automatically lock their access if you need to," explains Sue. "Whether you need those extra measures depends on how much you trust your child, but you can go a long way towards keeping your child safe with the free resources out there."

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"I play Minecraft with my son," says Sue. "And even though it's frustrating because I can't build



### Writer profile

**Siobhan Mason, mum to a 13-year-old boy and 11-year-old girl, is a freelance writer, who has just finished a two year stint as a childminder.** She is bracing herself for the teenage years by keeping up with zumba and pilates, and reading everything there is on understanding teenage minds. After writing this feature, she's in the process of putting the valuable advice she came across into practice.



anything, I've got to show an interest. If that open and honest relationship is there from the start, he is more likely to come to me if anything feels uncomfortable."

### Learning the rules

A great way to introduce children to the basic rules of online safety is through the age-tailored videos from Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) ([www.ceop.police.uk](http://www.ceop.police.uk)), a police agency that tackles child abuse on the internet, and the NSPCC's Share Aware campaign.

Lee and Kim's Adventures, a video by CEOP aimed at five- to seven-year-olds, shows children being stopped from sharing personal information with a bear in an online game. Superhero SID comes to the rescue and lets them know they should only share top secret information (such as their address, school, full name and location) with people they know – a vital message to get across as early as possible.

As well as using games, children are likely to access the internet through YouTube and search engines. A child-friendly search engine such as Kiddle, Safe Search UK or Swiggle, can stop them stumbling across inappropriate



*Young children shouldn't be left alone to use the internet, and sharing the experience with them means you can introduce techniques early to keep them safe online*

content, while standard search engines, such as Google or Bing, can be put into safe mode. It's also best if young children don't use YouTube as a TV, as it's too easy for them to end up watching adult content.

## "A child-friendly search engine can stop them stumbling across inappropriate content"

One South-West mum was with her eight-year-old boy as he researched a school project on magic tricks. "He was just about to click on 'when magic goes wrong', so I took the device off him," she told us. "I watched it later: they sawed through a woman in a box – her head came off, she went limp and blood spurted over the audience. It was horrific, and really bothered me."

This mum was following CEOP's advice not to leave children under 11 in a private space with a device and was able to stop her child seeing distressing content as a result. Another option would be to use the app YouTube Kids, although supervision for children under 11 is still recommended, especially if their device allows them to communicate with others.

### Knowledge is key

As children move up through primary school, it can be daunting for even the most technically-minded parent to keep up with the latest apps they want to use. But it's worth staying informed, and there are some great resources to help you do that.

"When your child asks to download an app, ask what it is, what they're going to use it for and do a bit of research yourself using the NSPCC Net Aware site," suggests Sue. "Don't say yes to everything. Even if you use the



*Stay informed about the latest apps and social networks that children are using*





right settings and controls, apps update themselves. Snapchat, for example, released their Snap Maps feature last year, allowing users to track other people's location in real time. With this update, everyone's settings changed, so parents had to reset children's accounts to private."

Primary school-aged children increasingly have access to voice and video chat through social networks, messaging apps or games – perhaps before they need to. "Young children don't need constant contact with friends online," says Sue. "But that's a bit different for secondary school-aged children. While it's part of a teenager's developmental needs to be with their friends more, that's not the case at eight or nine."

Although children aren't allowed on social media until they're 13, many lie about their age to sign up. "If a child goes on social media at age eight, then by the time they are 13, the app thinks they are 18 allowing access to things deemed appropriate for adults," Sue warns. "That initial lie has a knock-on effect."

### **"Once children are on social media, it's crucial they understand the implications of sharing"**

Delaying access to social media and messaging apps is obviously wise. However, once children are on them, it's crucial that they understand the potential implications of sharing images or videos, and how far and quickly they can travel.

The NSPCC's Share Aware campaign includes the short video called *I Saw Your Willy*, where a child takes a snap of a friend's private parts for fun. The next day, everyone at school has seen it, a message from a bully says "your willy is rubbish" and a man he doesn't know messages him asking a disturbing question: "can I show you mine?" It illustrates perfectly the stress and anxiety that can be caused by an apparently innocent action, and highlights the unwelcome attention sharing can invite.

## Dos and Don'ts

### Do:

- ✓ set up parental controls and filters, but be aware these won't apply if they use 3G, 4G, public wifi, or log onto a friend's connection.
- ✓ talk to your child about the dangers of sharing personal information including email address, full name, phone number, address, school name and location.
- ✓ help children realise that the people they meet online may not always be who they claim to be.
- ✓ ensure your child knows they can come to you if someone does something online that makes them uncomfortable or upset.

### Don't:

- ✗ let parental controls and filters be a substitute for open and honest conversations with your child.
- ✗ let children under 11 use their device in a private space, especially if that device has an app with any communication function.

As well as being able to share pre-recorded videos, children can now stream live content through social networks. CEOP's work with young people shows that they don't see live streaming as something tangible, meaning they tend to share things they wouldn't in a pre-recorded video. When online, children feel more confident to behave in a way they wouldn't in real life, so supervision and support is needed to help them make good decisions.

### **Parents' worst nightmares**

Once children have contact with others online, there's a chance they could make contact with ill-meaning strangers. When it comes to their child's virtual activity, grooming is every parent's biggest fear, and one that increases as children become old enough to retreat to



Photo: Leicestershire Police



## Internet safety



*As children grow up, they'll inevitably want more privacy when online. Building trust is the key to them coming to you if they feel uncomfortable about a situation*

their bedrooms to use their devices and communicate online in private.

*Kayleigh's Love Story* was released on YouTube in 2015 by Leicestershire Police, to highlight the dangers of online grooming. It's the harrowing true story of Kayleigh Haywood, a 15-year-old who received a Facebook message from a man she'd never met. After exchanging messages with him for two weeks, Kayleigh arranged to meet up with him, before being raped and murdered. It's a shocking story, that brings home the importance of online safety.

Teaching children that those they meet online are not necessarily who they say they are, is a vital message to get across at any age, and one worth re-iterating as they grow up. Showing them age-appropriate videos is a good way to introduce serious topics, but do talk about the content first. This isn't about scaring them, but there are people out there who want to contact children online, and kids need to know this.

**"There are people out there who want to contact children online, and kids need to know this"**

CEOP says you should remind children to be wary of people who want them to chat privately online. Offenders typically encourage children to move from a public forum to private chat apps, where they are less likely to be moderated.

Adults contact children through games too, so know who your children have in their gaming groups. "Try to be aware of what's being said, because bullying can be a risk online as well," adds Sue. "When I've been into schools, there are often children that have been ostracised from a group if they've done something online, and this can spill over into real life."

If your children do get bullied online, or comes across someone or something that makes them uneasy, then they're much more likely to come to you if you've had an open and honest dialogue and a genuine interest in their online life from the start.

"Children need to know that if they do make a mistake, it's not the end of the world. And that they can come to their parents for support," adds Sue.

If you celebrate the good stuff about technology together, play games with your children, and let your involvement stretch beyond policing their use, then the internet can continue to be the exciting resource it's meant to be. ■

## Useful resources

- Sue Wheeler runs internet safety workshops for schools and parents in Bath. [www.safeinyourhands.co.uk](http://www.safeinyourhands.co.uk)

- O2 and NSPCC's free helpline offers advice on setting up parental controls, adjusting privacy setting and provides information on social networks. **0808 800 5002**

- A guide to the social networks your children use, including guides on how to remove content, block people or report abuse. [www.net-aware.org.uk](http://www.net-aware.org.uk)



- NSPCC's Share Aware videos show children the impact of sharing online. [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

- Think U Know's videos show children how to use the internet safely (split by age groups). This is also a place where you can report abuse. [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk)

- All you need to know about the games your children play, including age ratings. [www.askaboutgames.com](http://www.askaboutgames.com)