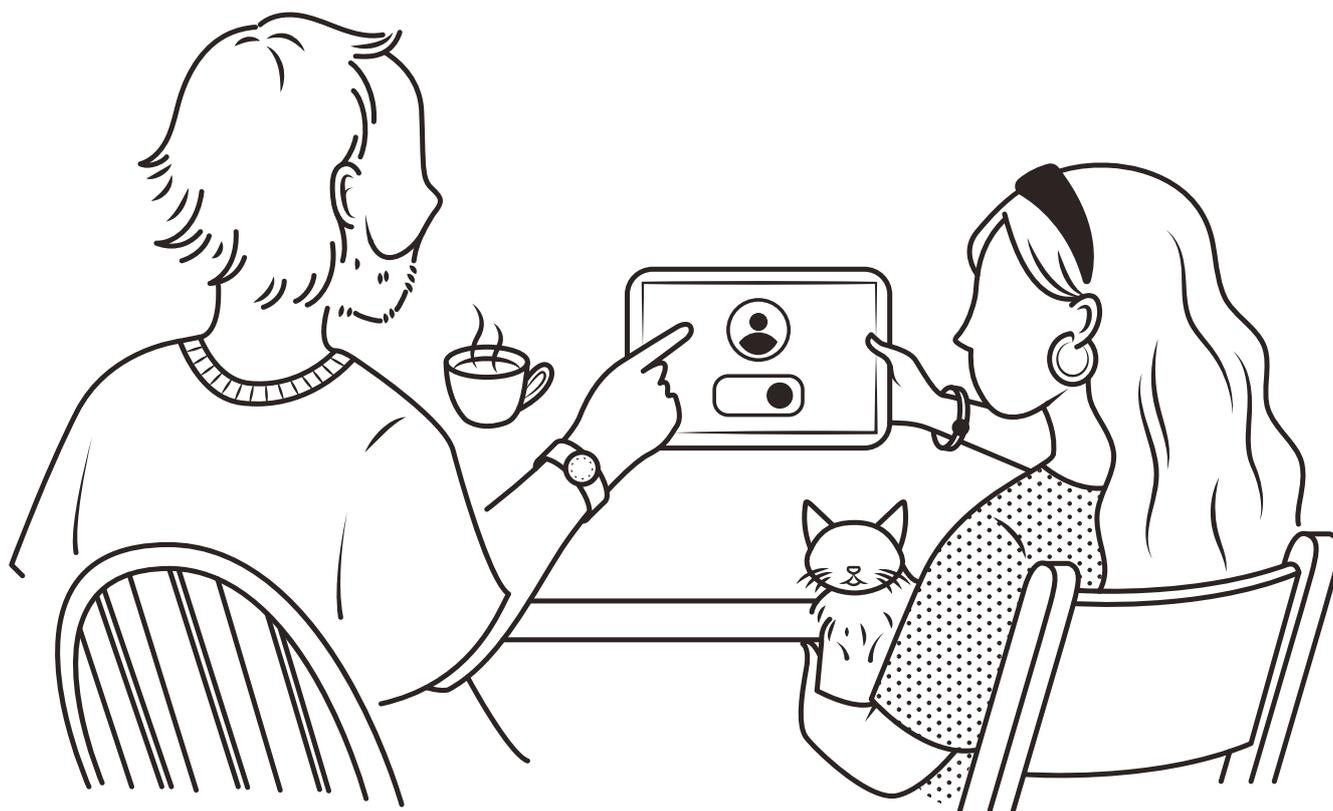


# MAKING SURE YOUR HOME DOESN'T HAVE AN OPEN DOOR TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSERS

A guide for parents and carers



The guidance has three parts:

- **Part One**

Helps you understand more about online child sexual abuse: what it is, who does it, and how it happens. It also tells you more about the ways children use social media, to explain why simply 'banning' it doesn't work.

- **Part Two**

Answers the question: 'What can I do?' and gives you clear, practical advice to help keep your children safe.

- **Part Three**

Tells you what to do if you **suspect or know** that a child is being sexually abused online, and lists specialist organisations that can also help.

**Young people are being contacted in their own homes on online platforms and apps and asked for sexual pictures and videos, while their parents and carers believe they are safe.**

More and more sexual abuse material is created by offenders who coerce and groom children into sexual activities, often in children's own bedrooms and bathrooms. They then record this via webcams or livestreaming services. It's known as 'self-generated' child sexual abuse imagery.

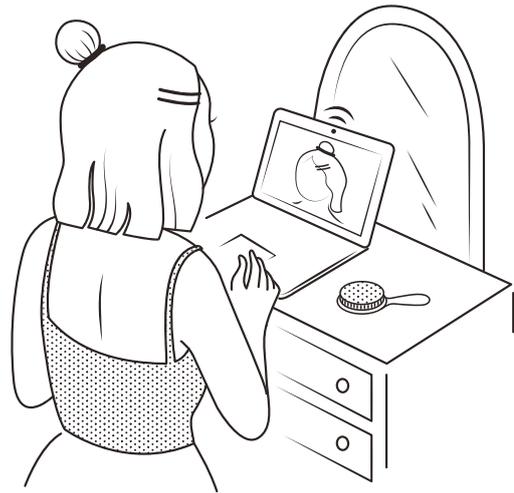
This is happening now, and it can happen to anyone. But you can do something about it; you can help prevent it happening to your child. If you're asking yourself what and how, this guidance will help you.



# ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

## What you need to know

Online child sexual abuse is not a new problem, but it is a rapidly growing one. The methods abusers use are constantly shifting and changing, and they are always looking for ways to avoid detection. This section tells you what you need to know about how serious this problem is, and why you need to act now, not later.



## What is online child sexual abuse?

When a child or young person (anyone under 18) is sexually abused, they're coerced or tricked into sexual activities. The child might not understand that what's happening is abuse or that it's wrong. It could happen offline, with images and videos of this abuse then shared online, or the abuse could happen online.

"Self-generated" child sexual abuse content is created using any device with webcams and cameras, and shared online via a number of platforms. Children are manipulated, groomed, deceived or extorted into producing and sharing sexual images or videos of themselves. The images and videos primarily involve girls aged 11 to 13 years old, in their bedrooms or another room in a home setting. With much of the world subject to periods of lockdown due to COVID-19, the volume of this kind of imagery has grown significantly.<sup>1</sup>

**This kind of abuse is a huge problem, and it's increasing. Here are some figures which might help you understand the scale of the problem:**

- In 2020, the National Crime Agency stated that 300,000 individuals in the UK posed a sexual threat to children.<sup>2</sup>
- 1 in 3 webpages of child sexual abuse includes girls aged 11-13 who have been groomed in their homes via webcams.<sup>3</sup>
- Between 2017 and 2019, online grooming crimes rose by one third (NSPCC).

**There is also evidence that online child sexual abuse has increased since COVID-19 hit, and lockdown began in the UK:**

- IWF's hotline for reporting suspected online child sexual abuse material received a record number of reports in 2020: 299,619.
- Of all the child sexual abuse material identified by IWF in 2020, nearly half (44%) included content created by offenders grooming and encouraging the children to behave sexually over a webcam or live-stream. This is a 77% increase compared to the year before.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news/%E2%80%98grave-threat%E2%80%99-children-predatoryinternet-groomers-online-child-sexual-abuse-material-soars>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/onlinesafetyathome>

<sup>3</sup> IWF Annual report 2021

## What form does this abuse take, and who is responsible?

There's a big increase in sexual images and videos (recorded and live-streamed) that have been created of children as a result of an abuser grooming, manipulating, deceiving or coercing a child into sexual activity over a webcam. This means less risk for the abuser: they have no physical contact with the child. Often, the child does not fully realise or understand what they were doing, or why.

With live-streaming, children may not know that the person watching can screen capture or record a video, and upload that material somewhere else for other people with a sexual interest in children to see.

This kind of abuse is different to sharing nude selfies among peer groups, 'sexting', or being encouraged to perform a sexual act for someone who is physically present.

In all cases of sexual abuse, the adult grooming the child for the material is the person responsible for it: the child is never to blame.

It's important to ensure that children understand it's never their fault they were sexually abused.

**Myth:** "It's creepy old men, alone in their bedrooms, pretending to be teenagers."

**Reality:** Many online abusers are much younger than you might have thought and are very socially active. They come across as 'normal', friendly and approachable. Some are open about their age and identity.

**Myth:** "My child is safe at home with me – nothing's going to happen here."

**Reality:** "Self-generated" online child sexual abuse often happens when children are **at home, in their bedroom, behind a closed door, sometimes with other family members at home.**

**IN ALL CASES OF SEXUAL ABUSE, THE ADULT GROOMING THE CHILD FOR THE MATERIAL IS THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR IT: THE CHILD IS NEVER TO BLAME**

## How do abusers do it?

This method of abuse isn't happening in dark, hidden corners of the web, but in plain sight, on platforms and apps used by children and their parents.

When offenders have made contact, abusers will encourage, coerce and manipulate children into sexual activities and then capture that as a recording. They often use image hosting sites and cyberlockers (secure file sharing services) to store and distribute the material. The time between first contacting a child to distributing material can be just a few minutes, or hours.

**Myth:** "I would notice if there was anything wrong."

**Reality:** Not all children realise they're being abused, and others feel too ashamed to say anything. There is **no guarantee you would know anything had happened to your child, unless they tell you.**

**Myth:** "Abuse and grooming happens over weeks, months or years."

**Reality:** The gap between an abuser asking and a child responding can be just a few minutes.

## 'Scattergun' abuse

Although some abusers might use well-known grooming methods such as giving children attention and compliments, or chatting with them to form a relationship, others use a more 'scattergun' approach – they just make contact with hundreds of children, and some respond.

The abuser may then groom a child by suggesting more and more explicit acts: 'Pose for the camera'; 'Do a silly dance'; 'That's great, but it would be even better if you take your PJ's off/ try that without your knickers on.'; 'I dare you to...'; 'Let's play a game!' The child may not fully understand what they are doing, or what they're being asked to do might not seem that unusual. What is clear though, is that this is abuse and never about a child consenting.

Unfortunately, some abusers are now persuading children to involve their siblings in this abuse. Much younger children – some as young as three – are being included in the creation of sexual content with their older brothers or sisters.

**THIS METHOD OF ABUSE ISN'T HAPPENING IN DARK, HIDDEN CORNERS OF THE WEB, BUT IN PLAIN SIGHT**

## Why is my child at risk of this happening to them?

Any child who has unrestricted access to internet connected devices, no matter what their background or situation, is at risk of this abuse happening to them. No-one is immune.

However, evidence shows that it happens to girls much more than boys, and most often girls aged 11 to 13 years old. It's helpful to understand some reasons for this, to realise why just banning a child from using social media is not the answer or won't solve the problem.

First of all, remember that for young teenagers, life off the internet is no more 'real' than life on the internet – both worlds are their reality. And just like offline life, online life can be full of positives. It's where they can chat to their friends and stay connected (especially important during the isolation of lockdown). It's where they can laugh and be entertained. It's where they can find and share images and videos. It's where they can argue their opinions and express themselves in ways that feel fun, exciting and carefree.

Online spaces are places where young people can feel empowered. They're places that adults don't totally 'get'; where teens can create a private life for themselves separate from their parents and carers. This can be vital for their development and preparation for adult life.

**Myth:** "Online sexual abuse only affects children from unstable or deprived backgrounds."

**Reality:** The IWF sees materials with all kinds of children from all kinds of backgrounds. **Any child with unsupervised access to the internet is potentially at risk.**

### The need for validation

Girls of this age can care deeply about what others think of them and the content they post (which reflects who they are, or how they want to be seen). Likes and follows can be important, boosting their feelings of worth and self-esteem. For them, everything they do online is immediate, with instant feedback – they may not be thinking about where it ends up in the future.

Many young people receive friend or follower requests from people they don't know, and accepting these is part and parcel of feeling accepted and visible. Recent research from the Office of National Statistics says that 1 in 10 children aged 10–15 have spoken to a stranger online. And according to the UK Safer Internet Centre, 62% of 8 to 17s have received friend requests from people they don't know.

Girls who do respond to messages and requests for explicit content may do it without fully understanding what they are being asked for, or as a way to gain likes or follows in return, thinking they are forming a relationship with the person asking.

**1 IN 10 CHILDREN AGED  
10-15 HAVE SPOKEN  
TO A STRANGER ONLINE**

## Should you just ban devices?

Banning a child from using all social media – for example taking away devices, making them delete their apps, or getting them to unfollow everyone they don't know in person – isn't the way to stop them being at risk. If you prevent them from accessing an essential part of their reality, and allowing them to connect with their friends, they may feel resentful, angry and alienated from you. A child may feel these measures are a punishment rather than about keeping them safe online, and look for ways to work around these restrictions. If a child is concerned about further restrictions being put in place, they may hold back from sharing concerning experiences in the future.

## What is the impact of this kind of abuse?

Even if a child doesn't know what they are doing, sexual abuse always has an impact. That's true whether it happens once or many times, and whether a child takes their clothes off or leaves them on. A child can never consent to sexual abuse, regardless of how it took place. But they will have to live with the impact.

**A CHILD CAN NEVER CONSENT TO SEXUAL ABUSE, REGARDLESS OF HOW IT TOOK PLACE. BUT THEY WILL HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE IMPACT.**

# WHAT CAN YOU DO

## So what do you do now?

How do you close your door to abusers? This section will tell you.

The **TALK** acronym breaks these steps into four main areas that gives you some practical ways to help your child reduce their risk and use the internet more safely. The key is to start now: whether your child has been using the internet independently for a while, or are about to get their first mobile phone, it is not too late to take these steps.



**T**

**Talk** to your child about online sexual abuse. Start the conversation – and listen to their concerns.

**A**

**Agree** ground rules about the way you use technology as a family.

**L**

**Learn** about the platforms and apps your child loves. Take an interest in their online life.

**K**

**Know** how to use tools, apps and settings that can help to keep your child safe online.

# TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

## Start the conversation and listen to their concerns

Having this first conversation will probably be the hardest thing to do – talking about sex feels awkward, and no-one wants to think about something as shocking as sexual abuse. There won't be many parents and carers who feel confident or prepared to talk to their child about this – everyone will wish they didn't have to.

Unfortunately, you do have to. Not talking about it could make the difference between your child being safe, or not. Here are some tips on starting the conversation:

### Pick your moment

There will never be an 'ideal' time to talk about online child sexual abuse, but try and make sure that your child is relaxed and calm, and open to having a chat. If they're hungry, or tired, or watching their favourite show, the conversation may not go well.

Try not to make a dramatic 'We need to talk' statement – a good time to talk about tricky things can be while you're walking, playing or doing an activity together, or during a car journey. Not having the intensity of being face-to-face or even having to look at one another can take the pressure off and help your child listen, and respond, more easily.

You could also seize an opportunity – for example, if you know their school is teaching about online safety, or the issue is on the news, you could carry on the conversation from there.

Pick your moment, but don't wait for the 'perfect' age or time. It is never too early or too late to have this chat: if your child is getting their first mobile phone, have an age appropriate conversation (more on this below) before or when they get it. However, if they have been using the internet unsupervised for a while, don't worry that you have missed the boat – you haven't.



### **Some conversation starters could be:**

"There's a few things we need to talk about now you're getting/have got your first phone."

"You can download that app, but first we should have a chat about you being safe while you're on it."

"You're old enough to be on the internet without us needing to supervise you, but there are some things we need to make sure you're doing to stay safe. This is because..."

### **Be honest, in an age-appropriate way**

Depending on your child's age, you can give them more or less detail about why this conversation is so essential. However, you do need to describe the issue clearly and in a way they can understand.

It doesn't need to be long description – for example, the "privates are private" message from the NSPCC PANTS rule is a clear, simple message to use with an 11-year-old. Although it was designed for much younger children, the message is still relevant. (Your child might also have learned this at primary school, in which case you can remind them of it).

**You could say:** "Your private parts are private, and no-one should ask to see or touch them."

**You can go on to say:** "Sometimes adults on the internet ask children to send them nude or sexual pictures or videos, or ask to see their private parts. They shouldn't ask that."

You can also start a conversation by asking what kinds of safety messages and teaching your child has had at school, and if they know why it's so important. You can then use what they already know to explain that the same rules apply online.

For older children you can be more direct, using the words 'online sexual abuse' and explaining what it means.

**You could say:** "The reason this is so important is because there are people online who ask children to take pictures or make videos which are to do with sex. This is called sexual abuse, and they shouldn't ask."

or

"No adult should ever ask you to do something like this, something that you don't want to, or that makes you feel uncomfortable, online or offline."

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## **Handling difficult questions**

You might also be worried about the kinds of questions your child might ask, and how you'll answer these. For example, your child could ask: "What kinds of things might someone ask me to do?"

You don't have to go into any details, but you could say something like: "They might ask someone to pose in a certain way or do a dance for them." You can also remind them that no-one should ask them to do anything that makes them feel uncomfortable or that they don't want to do, no matter what it is.

In the end you, as a parent or carer, will know how to explain things in a way your child will understand. However, it is important not to underestimate them – being honest and talking about why being safe is so important will help them trust you and take seriously what you're saying. They may be more likely to tell you if they feel worried or unsafe later on.

## **Avoid judgement, blame or shame**

When you speak to your child, whatever they tell you, never imply that they are responsible or to blame if someone asks them to share, or if they already have shared, sexual material.

The key is to keep communication open, and if your child thinks you are judging or shaming them for what they do, they will be less likely to talk to you honestly, and more likely to behave secretly in future. Be non-confrontational, don't blame your child, and emphasise that the abuser is responsible for their abuse.

Avoid criticising other victims too, whether that's their peers, people in the news, or characters in shows or films. It may be taken as a judgement on their own behaviour, which can be counter-productive.

### **Instead of saying:**

"Give me your phone! I'm deleting that app."; "You're not using your phone, it's not safe."; "If someone asks you a video and you send it then you've only got yourself to blame."; "You were wrong/naughty/it was bad to do that."

### **Say:**

"Why do you like using that app?"; "What kind of things do people talk about there?"; "No adult should ask you to do anything sexual online or send them anything like that."; "They're wrong for asking."

### **If your child does tell you about something that's already happened:**

#### **Instead of saying:**

"I can't believe you did that!" "Why did you do that when you know it's not safe?" "What a stupid thing to do/you are stupid."

#### **Say:**

"I'm really glad you told me."; "Well done for telling me about this – it can't have been easy to say."; "Tell me what happened and we'll work it out together."; "They were wrong to ask you to do that."; "No-one should ever ask you to do something like that."; "It is always ok to say no."; "They are to blame."; "Would you like a hug?"

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## **Suggest someone else they could talk to**

Some children will find it easier to talk to an adult who isn't a parent or carer. If you don't feel able to talk to your child in a way that they will hear and listen, have a think about someone else they trust and respect who might be able to talk to them instead. This could be an older sibling, a relative, a close family friend or a trusted teacher – but let your child have a say in who that person could be.

If you can, have a conversation with that person first, to let them know what they need to talk to your child about, and why.

### **Things to say:**

"I know it's really difficult for us to talk about this. Who would you prefer to talk to?"; "Do you think X would be a good person for you to talk to?"; "Who do you trust to talk to about this?"

**THE KEY IS TO KEEP  
COMMUNICATION OPEN**

# AGREE SOME GROUND RULES

## Setting rules about the way you use technology as a family

You can't have control over everything your child does and how they behave on the internet, but having a family contract or agreement sets out some expectations of how everyone can go online positively and safely.

Being involved in setting the 'rules' will help your child feel that their opinion matters and that they have a say. It will help them understand why there are rules about internet use and feel fairer than being told "this will happen" without explanation.

It's also really important that adults – you – follow the rules as well, and act as role models. Children will copy what you do and will pick up on and question you if there is one rule for them and another for adults.

**Things to say:** "What rules do we need so we're all using the internet safely?"; "What do you think should happen if someone doesn't stick to the rules?"; "Why do you think this is a good rule?"

### Example rules

Families should agree rules which are right for them, but examples of digital ground rules might include:

- Put devices away at mealtimes
- Make sure all devices are downstairs at bedtime
- Tell someone if we see or read something that worries us
- Be open about what you are looking at online if someone asks
- What is OK and what is not OK to share online

You can find a template for a family agreement from Childnet [here](#).



# LEARN ABOUT THE PLATFORMS AND APPS YOUR CHILD LOVES

## Take an interest in your child's online life

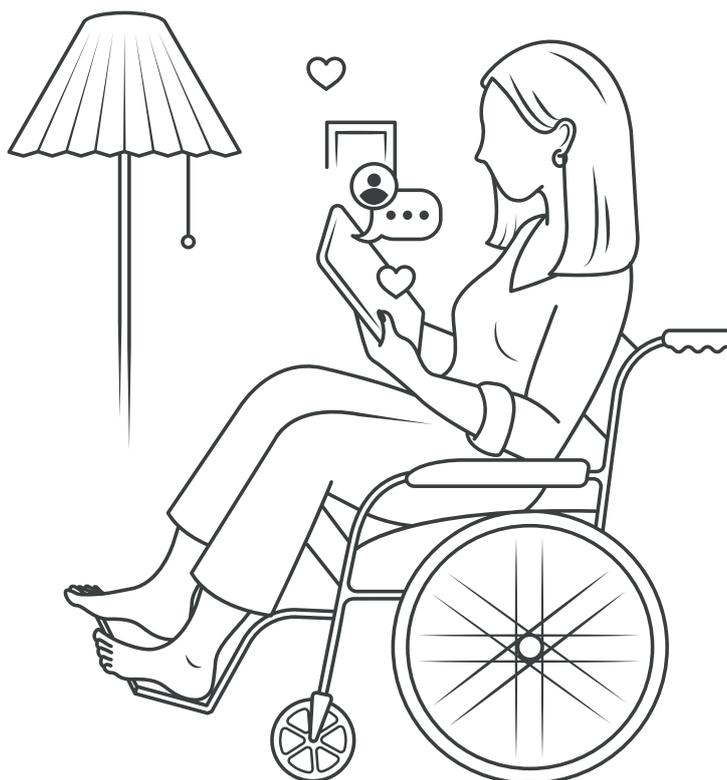
If a child was reading a book, drawing or making something, or watching the TV, you might ask them about what they are doing, show an interest or even get involved.

Do the same with their internet use – showing them that you are interested in what they are reading, watching or doing online in a positive and open way will encourage them to share what they are doing, rather than treating it as something private and of no interest to anyone else.

## Don't rush to judgement

Dismissing or mocking a platform or app your child enjoys using can lead to a child feeling ashamed of using it. They may be more likely to feel 'guilty' and be secretive about using certain apps or platforms – and they may use a device in secret (even if they're doing it safely).

As they get older this secrecy can become a habit, possibly leaving them more vulnerable as they are less likely to be open, or may even lie about what they are doing.



## Break down barriers

Talk about the social media platforms and apps that you use, and show your child things which interest you, make you laugh or might be of interest to them. This will help them feel relaxed about sharing their life on social media with you too.

Use some of the same apps that your child does; follow one another and ask and share suggestions of who else to follow. Set up a family messaging group and use it to chat, but also to share silly memes, funny videos and images from other platforms.

If you're struggling to use an app, or can't get your head round a new update, ask your child to show you what to do, or work it out together.

### Instead of saying:

"You're not looking at that rubbish again?";  
"Why are you still using that app / following that idiot?"; "Oh, X just spends all their time watching videos of influencers and celebrities"

### Say:

"What are you reading about?"; "Can you show me how to play that game?"; "I don't get this app – what do I do?"; "Who's someone really good that you follow?"; "What kind of things do they post?"; "Who should I follow?"; "What's X saying today?"; "What's funny?"; "Look at this video I found!"; "I really like that photo you posted."; "Can you show me how this update works?"; "That's so good – where did you learn to do it?"

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**These are some good places to find out more about social media, apps and platforms, including their characteristics and features:**

- [Childnet parent guides](#) on key topics
- [Internet Matters guides](#) to social media and apps
- [ParentZone parent guides](#)

# KNOW HOW TO USE TOOLS, APPS AND SETTINGS

## Understanding technology to help to keep your child safe online

You may already have some control over your child's internet use. Perhaps you only allow them to use certain sites, only use the internet where you can see them or block WiFi at certain times of day.

Whether or not you have controls in place, it's always worth taking a bit of time to look at what other controls are available to help protect your child online.

Find out about or recap on safety features that children are taught in school (primary as well as secondary). Ask your child to tell you what these are to see what they remember (you might even learn some new ones yourself).

### Examples of safe online behaviours they have probably learned include:

- username choices;
- not sharing personal information;
- checking sources of information;
- privacy settings (including friend/follow requests, photos and tagging permissions.)

If a child is upset by something or experiences bullying, for example, teaching includes areas like:

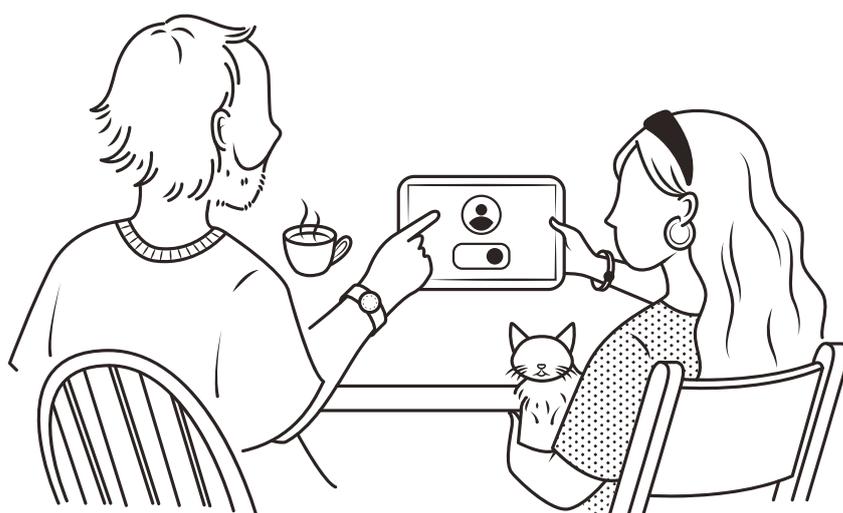
- muting;
- restricting;
- blocking;
- and reporting (to an adult, and also using in-app reporting routes).

### Instead of saying:

"You shouldn't be using your real name!";  
 "You mustn't post photos."

### Say:

"What did school teach you/Did school teach you about the kind of information that's safe or unsafe to post?"; "Is it safe to use your full name? What could you use instead?"; "That's a good username – it suits you but is still safe"; "Have you checked with X that she's ok with you posting that photo of the two of you?"; "That celebrity uses their real name because using social media is part of their job."



## Agreeing controls

Discuss and agree on privacy settings for the platforms and apps your child uses, and on more general settings for the family. Make sure you explain to your child why you prefer particular controls, want to apply new ones, or why you might restrict use of a particular app.

If your child understands the reasons behind the decision, they are more likely to accept and respect it, and be open to applying restrictions themselves as they get older and they become more independent in their internet use.

### Instead of saying:

"You're not downloading that."; "You're not using that app."; "X said that app was dangerous."; "Make sure you've put on all the privacy settings."

### Say:

"The reason I don't want you to use that app is because..."; "I need to find out more about that app before you download it."; "Shall we have a look at the settings together and work out which are best/will keep you safest?"; "I should use that setting on my account too."

## Different types of setting

Find out about and be clear on the different settings and controls that are available and how they can be used. Examples are:

- Settings within apps that your child is using ('privacy controls' or 'privacy settings' which will also include data use). These will give different levels of security according to the user's choice, such as tagging, sharing and authentication of follower requests.
- Settings on devices generally, such as location services, or access permissions given to different downloaded apps. These can be changed within the device and tailored for individual apps.
- Settings attached to your broadband supplier (e.g. 'parental controls') where you can filter which types of site and content can be accessed, the extent of what is filtered, or filtering at particular times of day.
- Third party apps which you can install on a device to add another layer of security. Features might include monitoring of use, time limits for games and call or mobile phone tracking. There are a variety of apps to choose from, but they are not all free to use.

The sites linked to in the section above give details about the privacy settings for different social media apps and platforms. Internet Matters has step-by-step guides for all types of parental controls, including those for every broadband provider.

**IF YOUR CHILD UNDERSTANDS THE REASONS BEHIND THE DECISION, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO ACCEPT IT**

# WHERE ELSE TO GO

To spot potential signs of online child sexual abuse, and for help with what to do if you suspect or know that it is happening.



If a child is experiencing abuse online, they may show some of the signs below. Remember though that these may not necessarily be signs of abuse, or there may be other signs as well.

- Your child is spending a lot more or a lot less time than usual online, texting, gaming or using social media.
- They seem distant, upset or angry after using the internet or texting.
- They are secretive about who they're talking to and what they're doing online or on their mobile phone.
- They have lots of new phone numbers, texts or email addresses on their mobile phone, laptop or tablet.

Source: NSPCC

To report online sexual abuse or suspected abuse:

### CEOP

A law enforcement agency which can be used by anyone to make a report about online sexual abuse or communication online, affecting either themselves or others. It also offers advice and guidance to parents and carers about how to talk to your child and take action if you have concerns that online sexual abuse may be happening to them.

### NSPCC

Support line: Parents and carers can get free advice and guidance if they are worried about a child on 0808 800 5000, emailing [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk) or filling out this form [here](#). The NSPCC site also provides further information about some of the common signs of different forms of online abuse.

If you think a child is in immediate danger, phone 999.

## If you have more questions and for further advice:

### UK Safer Internet Centre

This is where you can find online safety tips, advice and resources to help children and young people stay safe online.

### Childline

A free, confidential, phone and online service for children aged 5-19. Also contains information about a range of issues, including online abuse of all kinds, and where and how to ask for help.

### Childnet International

Works with children, schools and families to ensure safer internet use, and includes a parents and carers' hub with a range of resources and information.

### Internet Matters

Gives expert support and practical tips to parents and carers, including age-specific guidance about staying safe online.

### NSPCC

Has online safety resources, including how to protect children from online abuse, and online safety and social media.

### ParentZone

Provides support and information to parents to help families navigate the internet safely and confidently.

### Marie Collins Foundation

A UK charity providing support for families of children and children who are being / have been abused online.

"I was groomed online and sexually abused at 13. For years after it happened I suffered with severe depression and anxiety. I lived in fear that someone would recognise me from the images and found it hard to trust anybody. It was devastating. It felt like I was broken and damaged. I have recovered now, but I still know that it changed my life and who I am as a person."

Rhiannon at Marie Collins Foundation

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## Help centres for social media platforms:

[Instagram](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Snapchat](#)

[Twitter](#)

[TikTok](#)

[YouTube](#)

[WhatsApp](#)

[Twitch](#)

[Discord](#)

Looking for a different one?

Check all platforms at [NetAware](#).

