



Mental Health  
Foundation

**Talking to  
your children  
about healthy  
internet use**





Children are increasingly connecting with the world through digital media. With technology constantly changing, it can be hard knowing how to keep your children safe and healthy online. **What you can do** is help minimise the negative impact on your child, while encouraging healthy internet use to maximise the benefits. Some useful tips are:



### **1. Remember: the internet isn't all bad**

In fact, research shows there are many benefits to young people going online. From connecting with friends and relatives to following piano lessons or researching homework, it provides a wealth of opportunities for education and enrichment. Find out what your children are using and focus on positives.



### **2. An internet ban is rarely helpful**

This is almost impossible when access is so widely available. It is also likely to be counter-productive, encouraging secretive rather than open use as well as denying the many benefits the internet has to offer.



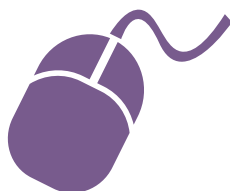
### **3. Be age-appropriate**

All the suggestions below need to be age-adapted. Young children usually like attention from you and don't own their own device, whereas teenagers may find it intrusive and stick to their own screens. Balance respecting their desire for privacy with letting them know you're there for them to talk to. With younger children, also use your devices' parental controls. Whatever their age, agree any restrictions together.



### **4. Keep talking**

Being open to discuss things in an age-appropriate way is key to helping them stay safe. It ensures your children can come to you if they are worried about their online activity or something they have seen, and vice versa.



### **5. Use the internet alongside your child**

When you go online with your child it encourages social rather than isolated use and provides opportunities to discuss staying safe online. Show a respectful interest in what they are doing, even if they want to use the internet independently.



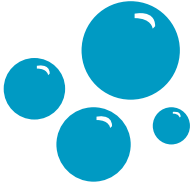
### **6. Promote good sleep habits**

Encourage everyone to turn off their screens at least 1 hour before bedtime. Leave phones, laptops etc. out of the bedroom and buy a separate alarm clock to wake up to. Don't forget it helps to lead by example!



### **7. Encourage active rather than passive use**

Being actively involved in doing things, such as creating or responding to Facebook posts, can have a positive impact on wellbeing. Passive use – like scrolling without interacting – can lower wellbeing and life satisfaction.



### **8. Break the 'filter bubbles'**

Online companies use algorithms to show you things similar to what you've seen before, reinforcing current interests rather than suggesting new topics. Teach your child how to interrupt these by searching new areas or questions of interest.



### **9. Talk to your child about body image**

It can be difficult for children (and adults) to distinguish between what's a healthy body image and what's not. Try to normalise diversity – we all come in different shapes and sizes, there isn't one ideal body shape, and beauty comes in many different forms not just airbrushed or filtered 'perfection'. For example, if you watch a program together you can point out things that are unrealistic.



### **10. Promote healthy sexual attitudes**

Difficult though it is to speak to your child about sex, it's important they don't get all their information from the internet as this can lead to distorted expectations. If you see something obviously unrealistic, make sure they know it!



### **11. Look out for warning signs**

If you notice a change in your child's behaviour, like spending lots more time alone in their room, avoiding friends, or a shift in their mood, speak to them about your concerns. Make sure you both know what help is out there (on- and off-line) and seek advice from your school or GP if you need extra support.

Our children learn how to use technology from us, even if they use it for different things. Often what we do affects them more than what we say, so if this list is a challenge to your own habits take the opportunity to decide to make your own use healthier as well. You will both benefit and avoid future arguments too!

## Useful links

Guides on talking to your children and setting up parental controls:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>

Normal sexual behaviour in children from 0-16 years:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/healthy-sexual-behaviour-children-young-people/>

Practical tips to share with your child about staying safe: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/490001/Social\\_Media\\_Guidance\\_UKCCIS\\_Final\\_18122015.pdf.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/490001/Social_Media_Guidance_UKCCIS_Final_18122015.pdf.pdf)

Tips, advice and resources to help children and young people stay safe. Resources are available for children, parents, carers and professionals:

<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/>

<https://www.childnet.com/>

News, guides and research for 'digital families'

<https://parentzone.org.uk/>

Advice on protecting your child online and what to do if you are concerned.

Resources are available for children, parents, carers and professionals:

<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>

Articles and regular newsletters about apps and online services your children may be using:

[www.net-aware.org.uk](http://www.net-aware.org.uk)

A toolkit for using digital technology to improve children's' mental health, including benefits and pitfalls:

<http://ayemind.com/toolkit/>

## References

All these tips are based on the best available research evidence. You can find out more from the following sources:

- 1. The internet isn't all bad.** Spies Shapiro, L. A., Margolin, G. (2014). Growing up wired: social networking sites and adolescent psychosocial development. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 17(1), 1-18.  
Ofcom. (2017). Children's Media Lives: Year 4 Findings. Available from: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/108283/children-media-lives-2017.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0022/108283/children-media-lives-2017.pdf)
- 2. An internet ban is rarely helpful.** Livingstone, S. & Bober, M. (2003). *UK children go online: listening to young people's experiences*. London School of Economics. Available from <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/388/1/UKChildrenGoOnlineReport1.pdf>
- 4. Keep talking.** Galpin, A. & Taylor, G. (2018). *Changing behaviour: children, adolescents and screen use*. The British Psychological Society. Available from: <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/Policy%20-%20Files/Changing%20behaviour%20-%20children,%20adolescents,%20and%20screen%20use.pdf>
- 5. Use the internet alongside your child.** Galpin, A. & Taylor, G. (2018). *Changing behaviour: children, adolescents and screen use*. The British Psychological Society.
- 6. Promote good sleep habits.** Galpin, A. & Taylor, G. (2018). *Changing behaviour: children, adolescents and screen use*. The British Psychological Society.  
Stiglic, N. & Viner, R. M. (2019). Effects of screentime on the health and well-being of children and adolescents: a systematic review of reviews. *BMJ Open*, 9:e023191.
- 7. Encourage active rather than passive use.** Verduyn, P., Ybarra, O., Résibois, M., Jonides, J. & Kross, E. (2017). Do Social Network Sites Enhance or Undermine Subjective Well-Being? A Critical Review. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 11, 274-302.
- 8. Break the 'filter bubbles'.** Flaxman, S., Goel, S. & M. Rao, J. (2016). Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(1), 298-320.
- 9. Talk to your child about body image.** Common Sense Media. (2015). Children, Teens, Media, and Body Image. Available from <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/file/csm-body-image-report-012615-interactivepdf/download>
- 10. Promote healthy sexual attitudes.** Diiorio, C., Pluhar, E. & Belcher, L. (2003). Parent-Child Communication About Sexuality. *Journal of HIV/AIDS Prevention & Education for Adolescents & Children*, 5(3), 7-32.



**mentalhealth.org.uk**

 [mentalhealthfoundation](https://www.facebook.com/mentalhealthfoundation)

 [@mentalhealth](https://twitter.com/mentalhealth)

 [@mentalhealthfoundation](https://www.instagram.com/mentalhealthfoundation)

London Office:  
Mental Health Foundation  
Colechurch House  
1 London Bridge Walk  
London SE1 2SX

Glasgow Office:  
Mental Health Foundation  
Merchants House  
30 George Square  
Glasgow G2 1EG

Cardiff Office:  
Mental Health Foundation  
Castle Court  
6 Cathedral Road  
Cardiff, CF11 9LJ