<u>Key questions: Keeping families safe online</u>

1. I am not an expert. If I don't understand the online world, how can I help my children?

We all understand the dangers children face in everyday life, and help them stay safe. But keeping children safe online can seem much harder. Treat the online world in much the same way as you'd treat the offline world. You don't need to be an expert on the internet. Talking to your child regularly, and being a part of their online world, will help you set and develop boundaries from an early age, meaning you can identify risks before they become issues.

You wouldn't let your child leave the house unless you knew where they were going, for example. You should apply the same thinking online. So ask your child:

- where they go online
- who they meet and chat to
- what they do online.

Don't forget, we are here to help you. You can check out the website, visit a store or call the Helpline for advice and guidance on anything you are unsure about.

2. How can parents keep up to date with what their children are doing online?

Keeping up to date with changing technology can be a challenge and helping your children stay safe online can sometimes seem even harder. But it's important to take on this challenge and treat it like any other parenting task.

If you want to know what your child is doing online, the best thing you can do is talk to them about it. Ask your child to show you their favourite things to do online, and take an interest in what they do – just like you would their day at school.

This will give you a way to support and encourage them while learning what they know, and exploring the online world together.

Sometimes, as adults, we're guilty of talking about online activities only when we're annoyed about it or thinking about confiscating a device. It's helpful to find time to just be curious, interested and to praise children for their creativity online and remind ourselves how amazing technology can be. By having balanced discussions about our children's online activities, and reinforcing our role as someone they can ask for help, they're more likely to come to us when they're worried or concerned.

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3. My child wants to use Facebook, but they are only 11, and I am not sure?

Children don't think of people they've met online through social networking and online games as strangers, they're just online friends. This can make them vulnerable to bullying, inappropriate friendships and grooming.

Online games, movies and some websites will have an age rating or minimum age to sign up. Age limits are there to keep children safe. So you shouldn't feel pressured into letting your child sign up or use websites that you feel they're too young for even if there's peer group pressure to play games and use websites and apps with older ratings.

You know your child best, so talk to them about the purpose of age limits and any concerns you might have, and agree together the websites, apps and games they can use and make sure they know how to stay safe. Don't assume they know more than you - children don't always know how to use blocking and reporting tools. If you need help finding a site that's right for your child a great place to start is [Net Aware](), and if you need help with technical controls, call our Helpline.

4. I have teenagers, what should I do to keep them safe as they get older?

Once kids reach secondary school, they'll be looking to explore their independence and identity. Children need to develop their independence, take risks and find their own ways to cope with things. There comes a point when it isn't possible to keep track of what your child does online. You'll be relying on things you taught them early on, and doing everything you can to make sure they know you're there if they need you.

What's important is to remember that good parenting is about unconditional support and love. You don't have to know everything they're doing to still be the major influence in their life.

Teenagers may be less inclined to talk about their online network and are more likely to be talking to people they don't know. You should talk to them about what they're doing online without intruding too much. Talk about peer pressure, especially when it comes to behaving in a sexual way. Remind them that any images or videos they share are out of their control once they send them. If they want to meet an 'online friend' in person, ask them to tell you, or another trusted adult and agree a safe way to do this the first time they plan to meet. Make sure they know where to go if they're worried.

Older children can be a powerful force for good in helping to teach younger siblings to stay safe online, so keep the family communicating.

5. What's the best age to start having conversations about online safety with children?

There isn't a 'best age' to start talking about staying safe online any more than there is about staying safe in the real world.

From the moment you start to interact with your child around technology you should be thinking about them using it safely. When they're very young that might mean telling them not to click on anything without showing you first. As they get older you'll be able to explain more complicated things. Try to strike the right balance between keeping an eye on your child and giving them the independence and freedom to explore. Simply sheltering them from the online world might not help them in the long run. They need a chance to learn how to behave online, and find out what's out there.

Be a good role model. Don't forget to think about your own online behaviour to help set a good example. It might not always feel like it, but your child does notice how you act and follow your lead. Discuss your family agreement, stick to it, and remind everyone why it's important.

6. What age is the right age for a child to have their first phone or tablet?

Even when they're really young, many children want their own devices. Some may feel pressure from their friends to get the latest gadget and that pressure can be passed to you.

We know that parent's sometimes give children their first phone in primary school, when they start travelling on their own, so they can call them if there's a problem. We also know from the Ofcom research that a lot of children own a smart phone by the time they get to secondary school, and that many young children have their own tablet. Every child will be different, and you need to decide what the device will be used for and whether your child is ready for it. There's some things that can help though…

When you're deciding what to buy, think about how it will be used. Just for playing games and watching films? Or for homework and school projects too? That will help you work out if you need a tablet, laptop or phone. If you decide to give your child an old device, it's a good idea to take it in to an O2 store – they can help you set it up in a child friendly way. Or you could purchase a child friendly tablet, which can restrict the places that your child can go online.

As most devices can connect to the internet, get to know the security settings and parental control options. And if they're going to be carrying the device around, you might want to think about whether they understand how to keep it safe. After all, devices are expensive.

Your child's first tablet or smartphone gives you a great opportunity. You can sit together and decide which controls you're going to set up. You can make sure you feel confident that they're ready to explore the online world on a very personal device. You might also want to agree on some ground rules for how your child uses their gadget. If you need help, think about:

- How long are you happy for them to use it each day?
- Is there a time of day you don't want them to use it?
- Where can they use it? Can they have it in their bedroom overnight?
- Do they have a limit on how much they can spend each month?
- Consider family agreements like not using devices at the dinner table.
- What are the consequences if they break these agreements?

7. Is it really worth setting up parental controls?

Each family has to decide for themselves whether it's right to use parent controls and filters. It will depend on the age of their children, and how they choose to manage the content that comes into their homes.

It can be difficult to protect your children from inappropriate things online. The internet wasn't created just for children, so they may be exposed to adult content. Broadband filters are easy to setup and give you the confidence that content will be blocked at source. These can help you filter or restrict content on your home Wi-Fi, as well as phones, tablets and games consoles. To find out more visit **internetmatters.org**. You can also set filters on search engines or use websites' privacy settings to prevent children seeing unsuitable content or advertising.

This can be particularly comforting for families with younger children – but it's important to remember that filters are only one part of a parent's online safety toolkit. Filters, for example, only block the content coming into your home – they don't help at all when your child is out and about. Remember that older children may find loopholes to get past these controls, so it's important to remind them the controls are there to keep them safe.