

Practical tips for starting a conversation about life online

The internet plays a significant role in the lives of children and young people; becoming integral to their social development as they get older. Talking to young people about their life online and encouraging them to share their experiences with you, is a key part of helping to safeguard your family.

Whatever your level of knowledge or confidence, these five tips will help you start, manage and maintain an open dialogue with your children about life online, and help you support them to use technology safely and positively.

Be positive and open minded about the internet

It's important to recognise the exciting opportunities that going online can offer children and young people. Although your children may use the internet differently to you, their experiences are still significant.

If your child mentions something you haven't heard of, ask them to show you, or explain in more detail, or you may need to do your own research. Try to keep conversations broad, and value their opinions when they're talking about what they enjoy doing, to show that you are interested in all aspects of their online world.

Talk early and often

The most effective way to deal with any online issue is to make conversations about the internet a part of your everyday routine.

Talking openly about life online from an early age, can be a helpful bridge to sharing safety messages and addressing more difficult conversations at a later date; it also shows your child that you are someone who knows about the internet and can help them.

Create a safe space for conversations

Look for opportunities to talk together. Sometimes, talking face-to-face can feel difficult, so talking alongside each other when out for a walk, or travelling in the car for example, are options that might make it easier.

The environment needs to be right; free from distractions, so that your child has your undivided attention. Remind them often that they can talk to you

about anything, no matter how difficult, and that they will not be judged or blamed.

Your child might not be ready to talk about something straight away, so show them that you are there to listen whenever they are ready.

Keep it relevant

As they get older, your children will use technology differently from when they first went online. Their knowledge and understanding will grow too, as will the challenges they may face on the internet.

To get a sense of how much they know and what support they still need, ask open-ended questions to let your child lead the conversations you have.

There are appropriate ways to approach all online safety topics with different ages. For example, with a teenager, nude images can be spoken about in wider conversations around consent and healthy relationships. For younger children, you could discuss what types of images are okay to share online, and what areas of our bodies are private.

Be proactive

Working together to create an agreement, outlining how the internet and technology will be used within the family, is a useful way to set clear expectations and boundaries for your children.

You might include time spent online; who your children can communicate with; appropriate apps and games; and why safety tools are helpful to block and report inappropriate content.

Ask your child what they would do if something went wrong online and they needed help, and reinforce the importance of telling an adult as soon as anything happens that makes them feel upset, worried, or uncomfortable in any way.