

Guide to Keeping Children Safe Online

The internet has become so ingrained in our lives that it's easy to take it for granted in the year 2017. We get online to check the weather forecast, for a traffic update, to find directions to a new location, to check our bank balance, to wish friends and loved one all over the globe a happy birthday... there is no denying that the internet has changed the world.

We would be remiss, however, to ignore the dark side of the web. Online communication has given everybody a voice and the freedom to share exactly what is on their mind from the sanctuary of a screen, which is a simultaneous blessing and curse. We are raising a generation of children that have not known a world without the web and all that entails, and young people use the internet for a number of reasons that are foreign to their parents. This article will also help keep children safe while they negotiate the many twists and turns of a life lived online.

Online Awareness

Arguably the three most important things that any child should learn about the internet are as follows:

- People are not always who they say they are. Unless you are certain you know who you are interacting with, do not accept a friend request or similar. Suggest to your child that, if somebody claiming to be a school friend wishes to interact with them, they should first confirm who teaches them Math, what book they last discussed in English, what color the chairs in the study hall are, or any other question that nobody else would know the answer to.
- Everything posted on the internet is permanent, and nothing is private – this includes words and photographs. Teach your child that they should never share anything on the internet that they would not want to be shown to anybody other than the recipient because they cannot guarantee that this will be the case, or anything they would not like to be held accountable for one, two or even ten years into the future.
- Never reveal any personal information on the internet, such as addresses, telephone numbers or passwords. This ties in with our first reminder – not everybody is who they say they are, and they could use this private information for unsavory reasons.

For further summaries of general online safety, investigate child-friendly sites such as [Safety Net Kids](#), [Kidsmart](#) and [Get Safe Online](#).

Internet Browsing Safety

The internet is like a labyrinth, with all kinds of information waiting around every corner. Obviously not all of this data is going to be child-friendly, but you can take particular steps to prevent inappropriate material being located by making the correct choice of browser. [This link](#) summarizes the many options available to you, and how you can apply filters that prevent young people from stumbling across anything not intended for their eyes.

Social Media Safety

It appears that a new social media platform crops up daily, many of which dissolve as quickly as they announce their arrival. To this end, we'd like to concentrate on keeping your kids safe while they use the Big Four – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

The first rule we would strongly recommend is that you insist that your child shares their password with you so that you can monitor their interactions. Once you have this information, look into each website in turn.

Twitter is arguably the most difficult platform of all to police as a parent as there are no restrictions upon who can contact your child. In theory a user must be 13 years old to open an account but there are no checks in place when this process is completed. What's more, Twitter is rife with parody accounts and imitators, many of which post offensive content (both language and images). This leaves young people at risk – they could follow an account that they believe belongs to their favorite celebrity, but is instead the cyber-playground of a sinister individual looking for attention from the vulnerable. Thankfully you can prevent your child from coming into contact with this material, but some respects you'll have to know your enemy. Any Twitter account can see [particular words, phrases and hashtags muted](#), meaning that they will never appear in your child's timeline – an action you can take as prevention rather than cure. Requests to follow your child can be set to [require approval or](#)

[declination](#) – though, again, you'll need to be vigilantly following the account to be on top of this. It is advisable that you learn [how to block users](#), too. This will prevent your child from accessing their profile, and will stop users from contacting your youngster. Finally, scan through the profiles that your child follows – if any claim to belong to somebody in the public eye such as an actor, pop star or sportsperson but lack the [blue tick that denotes verification](#), consider blocking them from your child's profile – this suggests that it may well be an imposter.

Twitter can appear like the Wild West at times, but if you follow these steps you should be able to go some way to keeping your child safe. The best action you can take is to open up an account and set up a [Twilert](#). These functions are most often used by businesses to learn when somebody is tweeting to or about their brand, but as a parent you can receive notifications every time somebody is interacting with your child – without following their account directly, which they may consider an invasion of their privacy.

Facebook, as the most well-established social media presence on the web, is a little easier to monitor. You no doubt have a Facebook account yourself, which means that you know that individuals must exchange friend requests in order to interact. Most Facebook interactions also take place on a public wall, meaning that they are easy to monitor – but do be vigilant about the [private Messenger service](#), especially if your child uses a smartphone; this is worth keeping an eye on. Overall, however, Facebook does apply [strict community standards](#) that largely prevent inappropriate material from appearing in your child's newsfeed.

Instagram is a comparatively young social media platform, and is relatively harmless. The site revolves around the regular exchange of photographs, allowing follows of an account comment below, and it's no secret that young people love selfies! Keep an eye on your child's account, and ensure that they not posting any photographs that they may regret (including snaps that include personal information, or even make it clear where they live), but the community at Instagram is largely friendly. Finally we come to the newest kid on the Social Media block, **Snapchat**. Hugely popular with teenagers and young people, Snapchat delivers messages and images that are deleted almost immediately after they have been read. Anybody can send a message to your child if they know their username, and the site controversially recently activated a GPS location feature, ensuring that anybody can see where you young person is unless they deactivate this setting.

The transient nature of Snapchat makes it almost impossible to monitor with any regularity, and the app has developed something of a reputation for inappropriate use. Have a full and frank discussion with your child if they are using Snapchat and ensure that they are fully aware of the risks – and if you decide that you would prefer your child not to use the site, you can [request the deletion of their account](#) as a parent or guardian.

Smartphone and Tablet Safety

Gone are the days where young people using the internet would use a family computer in a communal area – in the age of smartphones and tablets, it has never been easier to get online using any device in our pocket.

Thankfully, every phone or tablet comes with a parental control feature. They will be located in different places on each device, but you'll just need to rummage through the settings of your gadget – once you have done so, you should be able to filter out access to inappropriate apps and features. You may also wish to investigate [some kind of monitoring software](#).

It may also be worth establishing some ground rules with your children about how and when they use their smartphone to access the internet. It's probably advisable to have a rule that forbids the use of electronics at bedtime (or even in the bedroom), keeping all phones and tablets on a tall shelf after dark.

Do You Speak Internet?

The use of slang terms online changes almost as often as the British weather, and if you're going to monitor your child's interactions on the internet you'll need to know what the countless acronyms actually mean. [This link](#) provides a list of the fifty most popular internet acronyms used today, but is not entirely definitive. Some of the more concerning communications that any parent should be fully aware of include:

- GNOC – Get Naked on Camera
- PIR – Parent in Room

- 99 – Parent Gone
- MIRL – Let's Meet in Real Life
- TDTM – Talk Dirty to Me
- KPC – Keeping Parents Clueless
- WTTP – Want to Trade Pictures?
- NSFW – Not Safe for Work (which doubles up as a general warning for any content that would be inappropriate for a child)

Trolling and Cyber-Bullying

Trolling is sadly a part of everyday life on the internet. Sometimes it takes harmless forms, such as people deliberately annoying enthusiasts of cult television shows or movies (honestly, ask a *Star Wars* fan if Darth Vader is Captain Kirk's father and watch their head explode), but children are at risk of considerably more sinister [cyber-bullying](#).

Unlike conventional playground bullying, which can still be utterly horrifying for a child but can at least be left behind at the school gates, cyber-bullying can continue on all forms of social media and beyond. It's easy to say, "just log off", but why should you child be forced to stop interacting with friends and loved ones because of the behavior of bullies and trolls?

[Stomp Out Bullying](#) is an online authority of all things related to harassment, be that online or off. If your child is displaying signs of being bullied online, such as withdrawing from interaction or growing depressed and anxious, it should be taken just as seriously as 'real world' bullying. Make sure you are aware of who the perpetrators are, and take the appropriate action – whether that is discussing the matter with their parents, or reporting their actions to website administrators – or even the police. Certain types of trolling are now illegal in a number of countries, and while the First Amendment makes that difficult in the USA, [some steps are being undertaken](#).

Things to Watch Out For

There are certain behaviors that you can be aware of regarding your child's use of the internet. Taken in isolation they are not necessarily warning signs, but if they are accompanied by other shifts in attitude then be vigilant.

One thing to consider is whether your child is going out of their way to get online at a particular time each day, and being secretive about why this is. It's one thing if they play *Call of Duty* every Tuesday night with friends, but if they seem particularly keen to get on the web for private time and grow upset or frustrated when unable to do so, they could be communicating with a dangerous individual.

Terrifying fads also appear online from time to time, the most recent of which being the Blue Whale craze – a 'game' that encouraged teens and young people to commit suicide as the apex of a list of increasingly outlandish challenges.

The internet can be a wonderful place. Just imagine if one of your ancestors was to appear before you now and asked what the magic box in your hand does – you will surprise yourself at just how much good can be achieved. However, like anything it can be exploited, and young people are always at the highest risk of such exposure. Be vigilant about how your children are interacting online – and who with – and your entire family can enjoy a beneficial relationship with the world wide web.

Useful Links

- [eSafety Guide for Parents and Carers](#)
- [NSPCC Online Safety Guide](#)
- [UK Government Online Safety Guide](#)
- [Safety Net Kids](#)
- [Get Safe Online](#)
- [Kidsmart](#)
- [Free Parental Control Software](#)
- [Internet Acronyms](#)
- [Internet Matters](#)

- Stomp Out Bullying