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Together 
for Families

Digital Resilience

Guidance for parent/carers and
professionals supporting young people



www.cornwall.gov.uk/togetherforfamilies

Purpose

This information is aimed at parents/carers and professionals who support young people. It is not a resource to use with young people, but instead some guidance on digital issues which you may have concerns about.

This guidance isn't here to tell you how to do your job or parent – rather it is designed to offer reassurance and serve as a reference point. Our aim is to ensure that everyone is using the same language and sharing consistent, clear information with young people, whilst respecting your parental and professional judgment and experience. We also don't expect you to read this guidance once and remember everything it covers. Instead, it can be a useful resource to come back to if issues arise. For that reason, some of the advice is repeated throughout this guidance.

Supporting Young People to Navigate Online Risks

The digital world can have positive impacts on a young person's life. It offers space to learn, play, and stay connected to loved ones. For some, it's also a place where they feel less defined by their disability.

While the online world offers many benefits, young people may not always recognise the risks they're taking — or know how to reduce the chance of harm. As adults, we have a broader understanding of risk and how to manage it. This puts us in a strong position to support young people in making positive, informed decisions online.

We can help by:

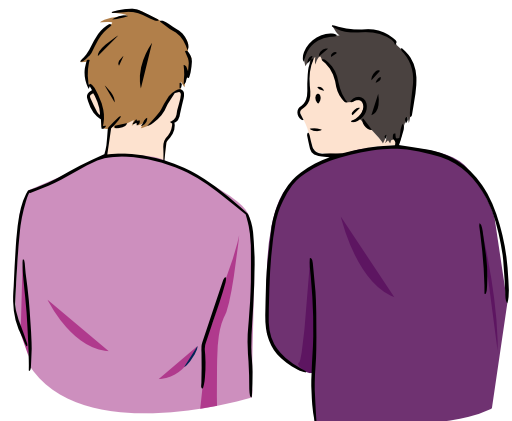
- **Teaching them about risks** in a calm and constructive way
- **Providing strategies** to manage those risks
- **Offering support** if things go wrong

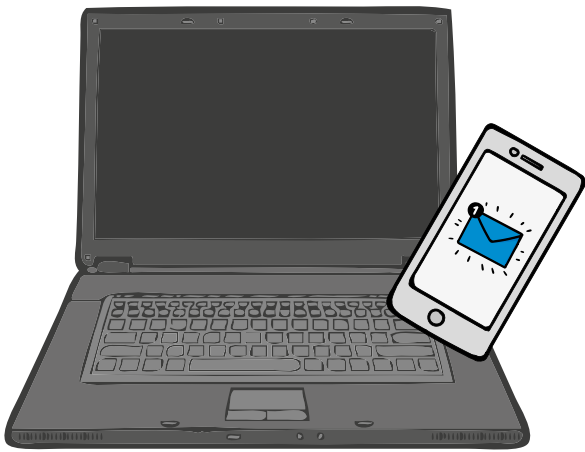
This guidance outlines some of the common risks young people may face online and suggests practical ways to manage them. At the end, you'll find a list of contacts for further support.

Importantly, **we do not recommend using scare tactics**. These can make young people feel unnecessarily anxious about the digital world and often discourage them from seeking help when they need it. Instead, we aim to foster open, trusting conversations that encourage young people to come to us when things don't feel right.

The information is organised into categories based on the **Digital Resilience Tool**, which offers more detailed guidance, resources, and support.

You can explore it further at: <https://www.headstartkernow.org.uk/digital-resilience/>.





Devices

Devices are part of the real world. Young people — like adults — use digital devices for a wide range of meaningful activities. Using a device doesn't mean they're disconnected from the "real world." In fact, they might be:

- Capturing a moment with a photo
- Listening to music to enhance an experience
- Fact-checking during a conversation

Because of this, we don't recommend confiscating devices as a form of punishment. Removing access to a device can unintentionally cut off a young person's connection to their support network, learning tools, or coping strategies. Instead, we encourage approaches that promote understanding, reflection, and positive behaviour change

There is no age at which it's safe to own a device

Device ownership will depend on a wide range of factors, from affordability to the parent's philosophy. A three-year-old who claims to have their own iPad isn't necessarily more at risk than a child who has use of parent's device (which may not have parental controls in place). A recent study of young people also found that not owning a device / not having social media accounts doesn't equal better mental health

There is no right or wrong amount of screen time

Like device ownership, more screen time doesn't automatically equal high risk. Instead of focusing on screen time, we need to ensure children and young people have access to a variety of interesting and engaging activities, both on and offline.

Avoid blue light immediately before or after bedtime

Blue light tells our brains it's time to wake up. Therefore, no phones / devices around or after bedtime can help tell the brain it's time to sleep.

Parental controls are useful but not perfect

Having parental controls on a device for younger children is a useful way of preventing them being exposed to adult content. However, they aren't perfect so device use should be supervised as much as possible. As children get older (eleven and older), they will likely expect to have more privacy, and eventually to have parental controls removed. This means it's important to have ongoing conversations about adult content and provide a judgement free space for young people to talk about what they've seen (which shouldn't automatically result in a device being confiscated, or an app being deleted)

Education

Increasingly schools will set homework that not only has to be completed on a device but requires research to be done online. This may include using AI to support research. Young people may also do research online for subjects they are interested in. A key skill in both situations is critical thinking - by which we mean questioning who is saying something, what they're trying to achieve by saying it and whether there are other people who have different views. In addition, children and young people may express an interest in how devices work or coding. This can be daunting for adults as we may not understand these things ourselves, but it's a great skill to learn.

Research alone can be risky

If young people are researching sensitive subjects, it's a good idea to ensure they have access to reliable information. We recommend sticking to the [NHS website](#) for anything health related, including information about losing weight. For all things sex and relationships, we recommend the [Brook website](#). For anything related to drugs we recommend [Talk to Frank](#).

Increasingly, influencers may tell their followers to 'do their own research'. This may lead young people to explore issues linked to racism, homophobia and misogyny (hatred of women). For this reason, it's important to have open discussions where young people can share what they've read and discuss it using the critical thinking skills discussed above.

Extremism

Extremism is when someone holds extreme views or beliefs that go far beyond what most people think is reasonable or acceptable. These views can lead to harmful or violent actions because they reject understanding other perspectives. Extremists often believe their way is the only correct way. Online extremism refers to the promotion of extreme views often involving hate, violence or intolerance, through the internet. Online extremists may target vulnerable individuals, trying to influence them to adopt extreme views or even participate in dangerous activities.

Accessing extremist content is upsetting

Whether a young person has sought out content, or has been exposed to it accidentally, it is likely to be upsetting. Having someone they can talk to without judgement can help them process what they have seen.

Some content is illegal

Whilst on the whole we don't recommend banning young people from accessing the digital world, they do need to be made aware that some content is illegal. This includes some violent imagery as well as speech (or text) which suggests hurting other people. Young people should be made aware that accessing this content can have serious consequences, such as being added to a police database or intervention (such as Prevent).

Curiosity isn't a crime

Extremism is often talked about on the news or in social settings, so young people may be curious to find out more about certain groups. We recommend giving young people a safe space to ask questions and discuss what they've read. Encouraging young people to use legitimate news sites, or Wikipedia is better than seeking out extremist groups websites or using AI to learn more.

Friends and Family

Using digital media to communicate with friends and family, whether that be to arrange to meet up, stay in touch with someone who lives far away, or simply sharing content is an increasingly normal and healthy activity for young people.

Always take a trusted adult when meeting someone new

If young people have joined online groups and want to meet up with the people they've been talking to, this can be managed safely. A trusted adult should accompany the young person, and meetings should take place in public. For older teenagers, they may wish to go without an adult, in this case they should still aim to meet in public and share their plans for where they're going and when they'll return.

Online friends are strangers until you meet them in real life

Young people may chat to strangers in games and on social media. They may begin to feel that they know the person, but until they've actually met in real life, they can't be sure the person is who they say they are. It's important to talk about this and discuss ways that young people can check someone's identity, such as having a video call. These aren't foolproof, as people can use filters. Any meetups should be supervised for the first time. The other person should expect that and will probably want to bring a parent or friend as well.

Respect other people's choices

Young people might want to share content they've seen with friends who might find that content distressing. Or they might put pictures on social media of their friends, and they may be asked to remove them. It's important to respect other people when they say no, and to remove content when asked.



Gaming

Gaming can be fun and a great way to relax and unwind. There is no evidence suggesting that violent games make people violent. However, games can be frustrating, and this can lead to outbursts. It's useful to have rules in place to avoid conflict and help young people manage their frustration. This might be the length of time games can be played for, or what they can do if they feel frustrated (like hitting a cushion rather than throwing a controller or device across the room).

A warning will be given before 'switch off time'

If you're aware a young person is getting stressed or overwhelmed as a result of gaming, give them a few minutes warning before you ask them to stop playing. They might need to get to a certain point to save a game so this will allow them to do that.

Gaming is fun, but shouldn't get in the way of other things

There's a lot of talk about games being addictive, but rather than getting too caught up in worrying about addiction and dependence, a simple rule of thumb is that gaming shouldn't stop the young person doing other things, like going to school, doing homework, sleeping and seeing friends and family. If gaming does get in the way of these things, it could be a sign that the young person doesn't feel able to stop, so having a break is important. It's good to have other activities planned - playing a game because there's nothing else to do isn't a sign of addiction.

Decisions on whether a game is suitable aren't just about age ratings

It's not illegal for a 15-year-old to play a 16 rated game, but the restrictions are there to help you work out whether the game is suitable for the young person. Games like FIFA have a Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) rating of 3 years, but may cause more frustration than other, higher rated games. The important thing to know is what the content of the game is, rather than relying too heavily on age restrictions. However, for older rated games it's always good to either check them out first or sit with the young person when they are playing it, rather than leaving them on their own.

Games might ask for money - you don't have to pay

Some games might have 'in game purchases.' This could be for 'skins' e.g. a different outfit for the character, it could be for 'loot crates' which are like a lucky dip. Other games might have ads within the game which might then ask you to pay to download them. Parents / carers should ensure the young person's gaming account isn't linked to their credit card / payment information to avoid accidental purchases. Similarly, if a young person is using a parent / carer's device they should check whether card details are saved and can be auto filled by anyone - devices will usually require a passcode for payment, but this can be disabled. Discussing whether items will be purchased in games should be no different than discussing purchases in real life. If game items are given as gifts from family or friends (Roblox in particular sell gift cards), this should be with the awareness of parents / carers.

Relationships and Sex

A growing interest in relationships and sex is normal for all young people. Young people mature at different rates and their emotional and physical maturity aren't always in sync, which means they might feel a strong desire to start a sexual relationship but not be able to manage their feelings in that relationship. It's important to talk about all aspects of relationships with young people, including digital aspects of relationships. These ideas should be discussed regularly throughout adolescence as their relevance will change over time.

The digital world also carries the risk that a young person will start a relationship online with someone they think is the same age as them but is actually an adult. Having regular conversations about this, with specific examples of people the young person talks to online will help them understand our concerns, whereas generalised talk of 'strangers' can seem distance and irrelevant.

Consent

Consent, at its core, is about respect and acknowledging each person's right to make decisions about their own body and personal space. Talking about consent is not only about personal safety but also about fostering self-esteem and mutual respect. Parents / carers can play a crucial role by modelling consent in everyday interactions, such as respecting a young person's 'no' if they don't want to hug a member of the family. Encouraging young people to express their wishes, and respect other people's boundaries, lays a foundation for healthy relationships in the future.

If someone asks for nudes, you can say no

Friends, classmates or people online might ask for nudes and it can seem like everyone does it all the time. In reality, most young people aren't sending nudes. It's important to talk about how to say 'no' in a way the young person feels comfortable (not all teenagers will want to have a debate about peer pressure, especially if the person asking is a friend). The Zipit App from Childline provides light-hearted responses to requests for nudes.

Asking for nudes can put pressure on other people

Most young people won't consider how their actions might be interpreted by other people. It's important to have conversations about why asking for nudes might be a problem and why people might not want to be asked. It is never appropriate to use AI to create sexual images of someone.

Sharing nudes with others is never ok

If a young person receives a nude, whether of a friend, partner, or classmate, it's never ok to share it with other people. If they were sent it by someone else (not in the picture) they should report it. Sharing nudes with others is illegal, and young people could get in trouble with the police, even if everyone is sharing the image. This also applies to images created using AI. It's important to create a safe space where young people can tell an adult if they receive these images, so they don't fear that they'll be in trouble just for receiving it.

Porn isn't like real-life sex

Lots of young people watch porn and have many reasons for doing so, from curiosity to sexual gratification, to wanting to know what goes where. It is really important young people know that porn isn't like real life sex - most penises and boobs aren't that big, body hair is normal, and most people don't do it in those positions! If young people are thinking about engaging in sexual activity of any sort (touching, oral or penetrative sex), they should make sure they've talked to their partner about what they are both comfortable with and know how to avoid STIs and unwanted pregnancies.

Everyone has a right to privacy online

There are lots of apps that allow people to track their friends or partners, and some young people might willingly share their device or social media passwords with each other. However, it's important that young people know that friends might stop this at any time and they should respect other people's boundaries about what they're happy to share.

Social Media

Social media can be a great way to connect with other people around the world. There have been increasing concerns about this technology being designed to be addictive. The good news is much of this can be overcome with some very simple rules to stay in control

Social media should be fun - if it makes you sad, have a break

If a young person is using social media too much, they might start finding it stressful rather than fun. They may even start to feel anxious when they can't use it. This is a good time to have a break and do other things they enjoy.

Filters should be fun - if they make you sad, have a break

Using filters or airbrushing images has become increasingly common. Most young people will have fun messing around with them. If a young person starts to feel like they can't bear to look at themselves without a filter on, this is a problem. They might need to have a break from using filters and from social media where lots of people are using filters.

Being an influencer is a full time job

Being an influencer is a desirable job for lots of young people. They might start putting lots of energy into growing their online following in the hopes they'll start to make money from it. But this can become a full-time job with very little financial reward. Most influencers do not make very much money at all, there are very few that can make it their only job. And it can be exhausting because it's with them all day and night. It's important to talk about balance and having a break from it when they need to.

Online friends are strangers until you meet them in real life

Young people may chat to strangers in games and on social media. They may begin to feel that they know the person, but until they've actually met in real life, they can't be sure the person is who they say they are. It's important to talk about this and discuss ways that young people can check someone's identity, such as having a video call. These aren't foolproof, as people can use filters. Any meetups should be supervised for the first time. The other person should expect that and will probably want to bring a parent or friend as well.

Watching Content

Most young people will watch online content. This could be on Netflix, YouTube, TikTok or iPlayer. Whilst it's tempting to be less concerned about traditional types of media, many young people say the content they find most upsetting is the news.

If you see something upsetting, tell someone

This could be anything from online ghost stories to animal cruelty. Make sure young people know they can talk about things they have seen online without fear of having a device confiscated. Instead, it's useful to discuss how young people can manage the content they see online, such as through unfollowing accounts or reporting content.



Where to get help and support

For professionals working with children who have questions related to online safety:

Professionals Online Safety Helpline: <https://swgfl.org.uk/helplines/professionals-online-safety-helpline>

For anyone who has seen, or whose child has come across, upsetting content:

Reporting Harmful Content Helpline: <https://reportharmfulcontent.com/>

For threats to share/sharing of intimate images of under eighteens:

Take it Down: <https://takeitdown.ncmec.org/>

For threats to share / sharing of intimate images of over eighteens:

Revenge Porn Helpline: <https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/>

If you have immediate concerns or are worried about a child or young person's safety?

Contact the Multi Agency Referral Unit on **0300 123 1116**

Contact us

 www.headstartkernow.org.uk

 www.startnowcornwall.org.uk

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If you would like this information in another format or language please contact:

Cornwall Council, County Hall,
Treyew Road, Truro, TR1 3AY

e: customerservices@cornwall.gov.uk

t: 0300 1234 100