

# Supporting children and young people with care-experience online

Advice for parents and carers to help children and young people with care-experience stay safe online.



## Staying Safe While Browsing Online

Browsing and using the internet is an important activity for all children and young people. It is a space where they can play, learn, develop hobbies, and find their voice. For children and young people with care-experience, who may feel socially isolated, this activity can take on additional importance. However, the risks of browsing and using the Internet for children and young people with care-experience may be amplified depending on their care placement, personal history and relationship(s) with their birth family member(s) and any trauma experiences.

### What you need to know

Keeping children and young people safe online involves three main areas:

- **Managing** - Using broadband filters, parental controls and privacy settings on devices and apps and a family agreement to set digital boundaries and manage online activity
- **Mentoring** - Developing relationships where you can discuss, support, encourage and stimulate the use of the internet for safe browsing
- **Modelling** - Children and young people learning through copying behaviour of others so provide good examples with your own digital activity and online behaviour, sharing good and bad results to generate discussion

### The benefits

Browsing online brings a range of benefits which can support children and young people's wellbeing and education, including:

- **Supplementing education and learning**
  - Devices are increasingly used to support learning and schoolwork. Having access to connected technologies can give them the opportunity to increase achievement and attainment of improved grades

- **Outlet for downtime**
  - It can offer children an opportunity to enjoy downtime by engaging with a range of content and information
- **Maintaining relationships**
  - Crucially it can help them stay connected with their network of friends and contacts at any time
- **Connecting with support groups and organisations**
  - Access to special interest groups, such as those for food/diet, self-harm, suicide, or other mental health issues, can be helpful and informative. However, search engine algorithms can also return negative content promoting misinformation and can ultimately be harmful. Age-appropriate discussions around the subject are essential to help them establish a critical view of this content
- **Challenging stereotypes and negative narratives**
  - For children and young people with care-experience browsing the internet may also allow them to challenge stigmatising narratives regarding care identity, in turn helping develop critical perspectives in relation to differing childhoods. As above, age-appropriate discussions around such topic areas are essential in this domain

## The risks

- Any child or young person from any background can be at risk of online harm, but some are more susceptible to it than others. Children and young people with care-experience may be more at risk or exhibit the following behaviours:

### *Differing social experiences and risk-taking perspectives*

- Children and young people with care-experience may have differing social experiences and risk-taking perspectives to their peers, making this an important consideration for this group when browsing online.

### *Excessive screen time*

- Extended browsing or other online activity may displace other offline activities that are important for a child's development like [sleep cycles](#).

### *Inappropriate content*

- In cases where children and young people with care-experience have previously experienced browsing the Internet without mediation, they may have already been exposed to inappropriate content and see this as acceptable or "normal". According to [Online Safeguarding for Young People in Care](#), carers reported that 21% of children had experienced an incident of seeing inappropriate content online.

### *Fake news and misinformation*

- Children and young people with care-experience may have experienced internet use in previously mediated environment(s). This may mean that you are not able to take part in critical conversations regarding how information is presented online. This may be especially true for those with variable educational engagement. These factors may lead to an overreliance on the information from websites and apps, without the necessary balance and objectivity, can lead to ['fake news'](#) distorting attitudes, expectations, and behaviours.

### *Cyber scams*

- Findings from our [research](#) found that children and young people with care-experience are particularly susceptible to cyber scams. There is a significant association between children and young people with care-experience experiencing cyber scams and being a victim of cyber aggression. This suggests that if they report a cyber scam risk, a parent / carer may wish to talk about other possible experiences which co-exist. For example, evidence indicates that if they report online aggression, support should include addressing cyber scams with them.

## *Privacy and data concerns*

- Speed and ease of use are important to children and young people and this leads to shortcuts in aspects like password use. Often a pin code will be a date of birth, when that date of birth is also posted on forums and social media sites or can be deduced from the posts they can contain. Password re-use across multiple sites combined with a lack of understanding of the risks can lead to account compromise and [identity theft](#). This is especially important to note if children are using shared computers.

### *It is important to be aware that:*

- Children and young people in your care may experience all forms of online risk - content, contact, and conduct when browsing. If their previous internet history and experiences have been unmanaged or unregulated, they may have already been exposed to these risks and may be unaware that they are at risk of harm.

### *The areas of risk explained*

- **Content** – Being exposed to inappropriate or harmful content which may include bullying and abuse, or harmful topics (e.g. pornography, self-harm, etc)
- **Contact** – Meeting strangers and being involved in high-risk relationships online
- **Conduct** – Where a child behaves in a way that contributes to risky content or contact or is the recipient of harmful conduct online

## The challenges

### *Managing access to apps and platforms*

- To help manage access to apps and platforms on children's devices it's important to set up parental controls from the start and have ongoing conversations about how children use these apps to keep them safe. Parental control should be reviewed periodically to make sure they still work for the child
- According to statistics, the dark web makes up about 6% of the content online. It is part of the World Wide Web that is only accessible through special software. The most used software is called TOR (The Onion Router). Unless you carry out unlawful acts, it is not illegal to use the dark web or TOR. However, children can access sites with indecent images, sites selling drugs and or weapons – this is also the case for the 'open web'. Due to the anonymity of the dark web, it is harder for law enforcement to investigate cases of abuse. Although the likelihood of children using TOR is low, it's a good idea to make yourself aware of [what children might see](#)

## Things to consider

Parents and carers should try to provide safe internet access and browsing capability for young people with care-experience. Whilst access may be considered a *right*, children and young people also have the right to be protected ruling out unmediated. Managing your child or young person's expectation from the outset, together with the rest of the team around the child, is essential.

Equipping yourself to safeguard those in your care requires a mix of your skills (including your communication and relationship skills) and willingness to get familiar with settings and controls across platforms and devices. Keeping up to date with the ever-changing range of online services and digital devices through sites like [Internet Matters](#) is an important element of safeguarding all children and young people, especially those with care-experience.

The presence of risk does not imply actual harm, but teamwork (bringing on board everyone involved in supporting the child or young person) and a positive, proactive approach to online activity will create a good digital atmosphere around the child and young person. This in turn may reduce the likelihood of them experiencing online harms and enable the support network to assist the child or young person should they experience online harm.

## Practical steps to help your child:

- Create a family agreement to manage expectations of screen use in and out of the home
  - [Family agreements](#) can be helpful to help manage expectations of where, when, and how devices should be used in and out of the home. They can be particularly beneficial where all the care groups around the child or young person agree with them and support them. Have the agreement of all involved with the child or young person through the placement and care plans, safe caring policies, and family agreements, etc
- Turn on safe search
  - Google Safe Search, restricted mode on YouTube and YouTube Kids app for mobile devices and tablets, are designed to restrict access to inappropriate sites but are based on community participation and algorithms for filtering content so may be less than 100% successful
  - Make use of built in parental controls

- Review and set up parental and privacy settings on the platforms and devices they use. Take a look at our [How-to guides](#) to learn how to set controls and privacy settings on a range of apps, platforms and devices
- Check if your [mobile device](#) contracts can have age-restricted content enabled
- Check if your internet service provider (ISP) parental controls are enabled
- Consider using dedicated parental control devices that plug into the back of your router. There are a range of premium products that can offer enhanced levels of management for children's devices and provide a separate Wi-Fi service for them to use
- Take a look at our [Monitoring apps guide](#) for more advice

- Connecting with the school and understanding their policies and procedures will enable discussion and use of similar approaches
- Ensure that online activity is only a part of a balanced lifestyle and that your child or young person can engage in non-digital activities
- Create device free-zones/times in the home, such as places where meals are eaten, and encourage them to take time away from their devices by switching off devices together and making it fun using apps like the [Forest app](#). Taking the time to do a [digital detox](#), can also be a good way for them to assess their screen use.

### Conversations to have

Developing an open honest non-judgemental relationship where children and young people with care-experience feel safe in discussing their issues is vital to reduce the risk of harm.

- Encourage them to; consider their health when online, take regular breaks such as the [20/20/20 rule](#), set their own time limits, switch off before bedtime, and avoid overnight use. Tools like [Apple Screen Time](#) and Google Digital Wellbeing can help them assess what apps they use and set some digital boundaries for themselves on what is best for their wellbeing
- Encourage them to discuss their browsing activity, good and bad, with you regularly. Take a look at our [Conversation starter guide](#) for more advice
- Tools such as ['Your Digital 5 a Day'](#) from the Children's Commissioner can help stimulate regular and ongoing interaction

Visit: [www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety](http://www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety)