Supporting children and young people with SEND online

Advice for parents and carers to help children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) stay safe online.

Connecting & Sharing

Although children and young people (CYP) with SEND are more likely to experience content, contact and conduct risks. Risks do not always lead to harm. It's likely that CYP may talk to strangers online while gaming or in a group chat, or may experience negative comments, but the key thing is to ensure they know how to recognise warning signs to prevent this turning into harm.

What you need to know

How is socialising online different for CYP with SEND? Interacting with others online through social media or other platforms has become an important part of CYP lives and even more so for those with SEND.

The benefits

Connecting, creating, and sharing with others online brings a range of benefits which can support a child's wellbeing, including:

- Making and maintaining friendships which might be harder to do offline

- At times it can be seen as a safer option to interact with others (depending on what they are doing) than allowing CYP to go outside (avoids risks of face-to-face bullying/ increased fears around knife crime etc)

- Some CYP find socialising behind a screen easier than face-to-face which makes them feel included and able to make friends and build connections

- The viral nature of the online world means CYP can put a spotlight on issues and concerns to affect change in the real world

- Being who they want to be without judgment

- A welcome distraction for needing downtime

- Managing their moods and relieving boredom

- Finding their 'tribe' of like-minded people

- Being more independent

- Discovering new interests

The risks

From our research, we know that CYP with SEND experience greater risks when it comes to content, contact or conduct risks. Any child, from any background can be at risk of the following risks online. But some are more vulnerable than others:

- **Online abuse** – this can include sexual or emotional abuse

- **Coercion** – Being enticed to send nude photos with sometimes the lure of gifts, tokens or money

- **Inappropriate content** – this can include sexual, violent or harmful content. CYP with SEND are also more likely to see content that promotes self-harm and suicide

- **Fake news and misinformation** – an **Ofcom** study found that 12-15 years old overall, saw social media as the least trustworthy source of news (39%)

- **Cyberbullying** – this can include direct hate/negative speech of the CYP, exclusion from group chats, not liking a photo or status,etc. CYP with vulnerabilities have three times more likely to be exposed to hate speech and content promoting self-harm and suicide than CYP without vulnerabilities

- **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

It is important to be aware that:

- CYP with SEND are **more likely** to experience all online risks compared to those without any difficulties, particularly contact risks

- Examples of this include sexting under pressure and coercion. They appear to be **preyed upon and singled out**

- CYP with communication difficulties are also **more likely to experience contact risks**

- Experiencing contact risks is also associated with a **greater risk of seeing harmful content and experiencing more aggressive behaviour** from others online

- CYP tend to see **no boundaries between on or offline life** and often become victims online, through someone who knows them offline and is aware of their difficulties/impairments. In this way the perpetrator has the knowledge to manipulate their target especially if they have SEND

- Although they interact less than their peers, CYP with communication difficulties are **more likely** to visit gambling sites and spend more time in chat rooms. Chat rooms facilitate immediate and direct communication between users and when targeted at CYP, are known for explicit sexual talk, innuendo, obscene language and aggressive sexual solicitations

The challenges

While most of us feel confident we would not be fooled by somebody pretending to be someone else, eg 'catfishing', or sense a person's questionable intentions, CYP with SEND may find this more difficult to spot. They may be:

- More likely to believe what they're told by friends and strangers

- More trusting and have a greater belief in what they see and hear

- Less able to think critically about what they share and the consequences

- Less able to spot risky situations

- Less discriminating of both their own behaviour and the behaviour they see

Things to consider

Here are a few things to think about to support your child:

- **Know the risks and what questions** to ask to detect and avoid risky situations

- **Be aware of what they do online**, the platforms they use and the people they connect with

- Whilst technology solutions are incredibly helpful, on their own, they are **not sufficient to prevent harm**

- **Think about what they are doing online** rather than just the time they spend doing it

- Support their desire for **autonomy and independence**

- Don't ban technology or social media – it's a key part of how CYP connect and communicate

- Can they manage the online risk they may face?

- What are they sharing with others?

- If they are too young or their disability makes it harder for them to recognise online risks, try **social apps made for under 13s**

Practical steps to protect CYP

Are they ready and equipped to socialise and share online?

- **Create a digital family agreement** – set boundaries on how CYP interact online and what sites and apps they use

- **Set up tech safely** – as a parent or carer of a child with additional needs, having greater visibility and supervision can be extremely helpful to reassure you they are doing fine.

- **Use privacy settings** – most of the popular social media platforms have a number of different tools and settings that you can use to manage who your child can interact with online

- **Keep checking in** – schedule regular check-ins to talk about what they do online and review and reinforce the agreed digital rules that you have set together

- **Managing wellbeing** – Both **Android** and **Apple** devices have a range of accessibility features that you can customise to help CYP get the best out of their experience online

- **Managing their time on social media** – there are a number of social apps and tools that allow review or set limits of the time spent on these platforms, such as Instagram's 'Your Activity' and 'Your Time' on Facebook

- **Set up family & friendship groups** – it can be helpful to set up their social account together and guide them towards friends and family members they can add. Doing so can reduce the risks of connecting with strangers that could cause them harm

Where do young people go to socialise?

Visit: www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety