

A photograph of two young boys sitting together, looking intently at a red tablet computer. The boy on the left is wearing a white polo shirt, and the boy on the right is wearing glasses and a white shirt. They are in a room with blue walls and a window with lace curtains. The image is overlaid with a blue and red banner containing text.

**TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS:
KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of our lives. With schools closed and lockdowns imposed, many children and young people are spending all their time at home. Much of that time may be spent online, often for much longer than is usual.

Being able to connect online provides valuable opportunities to learn, play and socialize with friends and peers and access information and support. It is therefore extremely important for children and young people. However, ***spending time online*** comes with **risks**.

- **Online sexual abuse.** Children and adolescents may be approached by strangers or by people they know who have a sexual interest in them. They may be sent sexual content or be asked to share sexualised pictures or videos of themselves. Adults may build a relationship with them with the intention of sexually abusing them (so called 'grooming').
- **Cyberbullying.** Children and adolescents may receive or be the subject of mean comments, messages and posts. They may be left out of groups online. This can increase stress and feelings of isolation. They may also engage in bullying online themselves.



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- **Risk-taking online behaviour.** Physical distancing and lack of face to face interaction with friends and partners may lead children and adolescents to take risks or do things they might otherwise not do online – for example, through sexting (sending sexually explicit messages) or sharing nude or sexual photos and videos. Their image may then be shared by others without their consent. And they may be at risk of extortion, revenge porn, harassment and humiliation. **Sending and receiving sexualised content of minors can also risk criminal liability.**
- **Potentially harmful content.** This includes accessing, being sent and sharing harmful content such as: incitement to suicide and self-harm; violent or xenophobic content; and marketing that is not appropriate for children. Children and adolescents may also be exposed to [misinformation](#) about COVID-19 that may make them more fearful, anxious and confused about their world.
- **Children’s privacy may also be at greater risk.** Many of the apps, including those that schools may ask your child to use, may pose privacy risks to users and may result in their data being compromised, or in personal details and information that may not usually be shared online, becoming easily accessed and exploited.

These risks do not only come from strangers but also from people that they may already know online or offline.

While children and adolescents will no doubt be spending more time online, remember that **not all time spent online, in front of a screen, is the same.** It will be almost impossible for you to prevent your child going online for longer when they have few alternatives to going outside. **If we think of children as being enthusiastic about the opportunities that technology offers** rather than being obsessed with technology, then we are better placed to think about how to manage the time that children spend online.

Here are some **TIPS** that can help you keep your children safe during their time online.

- 1. Agree as a family on boundaries and expectations:** Additional screen time does not mean unregulated time online. Discuss and agree on how much time your children can spend online, how long they can play games for, how long they can spend chatting and how long they need to do school work or homework. Agreements or contracts such as no devices at dinner (for parents and for children!) or no devices after a certain time, can also be introduced.



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- 2. Speak to your child about online safety:** Now is an important opportunity to engage and [communicate with your child about what they are doing online](#), and about safe and age-appropriate platforms, websites and social media and the steps they can take to stay safe on the internet. You can find some useful examples of how to do this [here](#) as well as [here](#). Remember, when speaking to your child about their time online, always be positive and open. Ask them if they are worried about anything and show that you are available to listen. Ask them about their online friends¹.

It is just as important to know and understand that **many of the same behaviours and factors that keep children safe offline can help keep children safe online.**

- 3. Understanding and encouraging positive social values, respect, empathy, good communication, and conflict resolution can all help keep children safe online,** and these are things that **parents do not need technological skills to talk about with their child.**

Talk to your child about how their online actions and behaviours could affect other people and how the behaviours of others could affect them. There are some useful [resources](#) online that can assist you with these conversations.

- 4. Having said that, become familiar with online safety tools.** These include the Safe Search option that most browsers and common search engines have (usually under the 'Settings' menu) and parental controls on devices, especially for younger children. Here are some [useful tools](#) for keeping your children safe on Facebook, as well as ideas for talking to your children about being good digital citizens and building their digital skills. Information on how to keep your child's data and privacy safe in different web browsers can be found [here](#); information on data privacy concerning social media accounts your child may use, such as Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat and others, is available [here](#).

¹ Adapted from the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, United Kingdom. More tips like these can be found [here](#).

5. Know where to seek help and assistance for both yourself and your child.

Most social media platforms and apps have built-in reporting tools. Visit the FAQ or help section of the apps your child is using to find out more. **If you find unwanted sexual content online, or feel your child might be getting into a situation that places them at sexual risk, know where to report it.** Depending on where you live, there may be a [national hotline](#) for reporting child sexual abuse material, but wherever you live, you can make a report through the [Internet Watch Foundation](#) and NCMEC's [CyberTipline](#).

It is important to be aware of any signs of your child being upset or distressed from their time spent on the internet. It is also important that your child is able to contact and access support, for example through a [national Child Helpline](#).





- 6. Identify trusted people, either adults or peers, your child can talk to:** Accept that your child is not always most comfortable speaking to you as a parent about some of the things they may encounter online. Identify together someone that they would be okay talking to about what they experience online, whom both of you trust, and agree that this is the person they will speak to.

- 7. Understand the privacy risks:** Reading the privacy policies of the different video and communication tools your child is using would be ideal, but a quick online search can provide the key information. Simply put the name of the application in quotes in the search box and use phrasing like this: "Application name" & privacy risks. Also ensure that your child's devices have the latest software updates and anti-virus programmes, and that the privacy settings are set to high. Make sure that when your child is using any new application, their location cannot be identified or used to trace where they might be. Remember that when they step away from the camera for any reason, the video may still be recording. Use a piece of tape or post-it note to cover the camera when not using it to remind everyone in the family when the camera is on. Most importantly, ensure that the video is turned off at the end of a session.

8. **Respect your children's privacy online:** The sharing of family images and personal stories relating to the lockdown and related challenges through social media is often a way of remaining connected, finding humour and seeking comfort. However, be careful that when **sharing** your own stories and photos, you do not share photos that may compromise your child, or affect their own privacy and protection.

9. **Play with your children – online!:** Don't think of online games as a child-only pastime. Explore online games with your children, as well as social media, websites and apps. This offers a useful opportunity to talk to and engage your children about their world and what is important to them. Online apps, programmes and sites can also provide ideas and opportunities to play games and be creative offline and to exercise together through streaming channels and videos indoors, increasing positive bonding time. It is important that you also find time to do offline activities with your children and encourage them to do things that we often don't get a chance to do in this digital age, like reading books or playing indoor games.



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10. Finally, **be PROACTIVE in speaking and engaging with your children during this period.** The internet and technology can provide many opportunities and benefits during the lockdown and beyond, and these are greatly enhanced when children are equipped with the right emotional tools and knowledge to make the most of them. Knowing how children can stay safe in cyberspace is important, and this requires an active mediating role by parents and caregivers, regardless of their own technical skills.

These simple steps can contribute to a healthy and happy relationship around tech use between you and your children long after the COVID-19 pandemic has ended.

Some useful resources:

- Better Internet for Kids:
<https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/web/portal/practice/awareness/detail?articleId=5822742>
- Digital Parenting Coach: <https://www.digitalparentingcoach.com/>
- Parenting For A Digital Future:
<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/>
- Australia e-Safety Commissioner:
[Global online safety advice for parents and carers – COVID 19](#)

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