

Online safety guide

For parents and carers supporting children and young people



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Introduction



The online world is part of daily life for children and young people. While it can support learning, creativity and connection, it also comes with risks. New apps, platforms and technologies are appearing all the time, and it's not always clear what's safe or where to start.

If you've ever thought, 'I don't know enough about this' – you're not alone.

The good news is, you don't need to know everything. Simple everyday actions and just being there for your child make the biggest difference. This guide complements the knowledge and skills you already have and gives you practical ways to build your confidence and support your child online.

You don't have to read it in one go. You can start with a section or topic that seems relevant right now, or dip in and out as needed. Either way, it will help you:

- understand common online risks and issues
- learn what helps in different scenarios
- talk with your child about what they do online
- know how to respond if something goes wrong.

For more detailed advice and up-to-date resources, visit [eSafety.gov.au/parents](https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents).

Quick start

If you only read one page, read this.



Common online risks

Children and young people may experience:

- upsetting, confusing or inappropriate content
- unkind behaviour or bullying
- contact from people they don't know or trust
- pressure to share personal information or images
- content that influences how they think, feel or behave.

What helps most

- **Stay connected** – have regular conversations with your child about what they like to do online.
- **Keep communication open** – be curious and listen without judgement so they feel safe to speak up.
- **Set realistic boundaries** – make decisions together about the devices and apps they use.
- **Use safety and privacy settings** – explore these together and review them over time.
- **Build digital literacy skills** – encourage your child to pause, question and ask for help when they need it.

If something goes wrong online

- Stay calm, listen and reassure your child.
- Work through next steps together.
- Take action, such as muting or reporting the account.
- Check back in and seek extra support as needed.

For step-by-step guidance, see [Help and support](#).

Important note

This guide discusses **sensitive topics** related to online harm. If anything feels overwhelming, you can pause, skip sections, or return later. You may wish to reach out to someone you trust or a support service if needed. Further details are available in the **Help and support** section of this guide.

If a child or young person is in immediate danger – being threatened or expressing thoughts about harming themselves or others – call Triple Zero (000) immediately.



You can also contact a counselling and support service like Lifeline on 13 11 14 for 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention, or Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 for free, confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling for children and young people aged 5 to 25.

Disclaimer: This guide provides general information only. It is not legal advice and does not replace professional support. If you're seriously concerned about a child's safety or wellbeing, seek professional help as soon as possible.



Foundations

What matters most

Online safety is about creating the foundations that help your child build digital skills, come to you for help, and stay safer over time.



Connection comes first

Children and young people are more likely to ask for help when they feel:

- listened to without judgement
- taken seriously
- confident they won't get in trouble for speaking up.

This doesn't mean every conversation will be easy. Staying calm, curious and supportive helps keep communication open – even in difficult moments.

Some children may need additional support with communication or regulation. You know your child best, so adjust your approach to suit them.

Small steps make a difference

There's no single rule or setting that keeps children safe online. What helps are:

- regular, everyday conversations with your child
- shared expectations that grow over time
- modelling the habits and behaviours you wish to see
- ongoing support as your child becomes more independent.

Helping your child navigate risk – with guidance – is more effective than trying to remove it entirely. This means sharing how you use technology and deal with online challenges, and gradually building your child’s ability to make decisions, recognise problems and ask for help.

Building digital literacy and critical thinking skills

Children and young people are constantly trying to make sense of what they see online – including content that may be inaccurate, fake, misleading, or designed to influence how they think, feel and behave.

Supporting them to question and reflect is a key part of online safety. You can model this by talking about how you decide what to trust, showing how you check sources and being open about mistakes.

A simple approach you can share is:

Stop • Think • Check

- **Stop**

Pause before you click, share or reply.

- **Think**

Ask: Who made this? What do they want me to do?

- **Check**

Look for other sources or ask a trusted adult if you’re unsure.

Remind your child that if something feels surprising, upsetting or ‘too good to be true’, it’s worth slowing down and questioning.



You already know your child, support them through challenges and help them learn and grow. This guide builds on this with practical information and steps you can use to help them have safer, more positive online experiences.

You can also visit [eSafety.gov.au/tech-agreement](https://www.esafety.gov.au/tech-agreement) to create a shared plan with your child about how they use technology. These work best when children are involved in the decisions.

Adapting to your child's age and stage

Children's online needs change as they grow. What works for a younger child may not suit a teenager.

Your role shifts over time too, from guiding closely to supporting independence.

You know your child best. These stages are a guide to typical online development but children may experience and respond to things in different ways.

Some children – including those with disability – may need extra or tailored support.

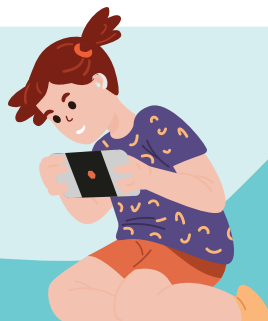
Use this table as a starting point when exploring the topics that follow, and adapt the strategies throughout this guide to suit your child's communication, learning and emotional needs.



Developmental stage (guide only)	What this may look like	What helps most
Younger children	Learning through shared use and play. Limited understanding of risk.	Stay close and involved. Use devices together, keep settings strong, and talk simply about what's okay online. Use concrete everyday examples to help them understand. For age-appropriate resources and advice, visit eSafety.gov.au/early-years
Primary school years	Starting to explore more independently, but still need structure and support.	Set clear expectations, check in regularly, and talk about privacy, kindness and asking for help. Encourage critical questioning of what they see online and if they can notice patterns or trends, such as advertisements and topics that are repeatedly promoted across platforms. For age-appropriate resources and advice, visit eSafety.gov.au/kids
Teens and young people	Greater independence, social connection and decision-making online.	Stay connected, shift from monitoring to mentoring, and have ongoing conversations about choices, boundaries and respect. Discuss how online content can influence how we think, feel and behave. For more information and advice, visit eSafety.gov.au/young-people

TOPIC:

Gaming and time online



Topic at a glance

What children and young people may experience:

- contact with people they don't know, including through chat or voice
- exposure to unkind behaviour, bullying or inappropriate content
- pressure to keep playing, spend money or stay online longer
- difficulty switching off, especially when games are social or competitive.

Gaming can also:

- support problem solving, creativity and teamwork
- help children connect with friends and shared interests
- be a positive way to relax and have fun.

What helps

You don't need to understand every game your child plays. What matters most is showing interest, managing time together and knowing who they're playing with.

Age and stage

- For younger children, try playing together and keeping gaming in shared spaces.
- For primary years, focus on building habits, boundaries and positive behaviour together.
- For teens, shift towards negotiating expectations together and supporting independence.

Stay involved

Children are more likely to talk about gaming when the adults around them show genuine interest.

- Ask your child to show you how their games work.
- Watch a play-through video or play together so you understand what's involved.
- Notice who they play with and how they interact.
- Talk about what they enjoy – and what frustrates them.

Set boundaries together

Clear, shared expectations work better than rigid rules – especially as children get older.

- Agree on when and where gaming happens.
- Build in breaks and device-free times, such as during meals, family time, before bed.
- Use simple transition strategies like countdowns or finishing after a set number of rounds.
- Agree on clear spending rules for in-game purchases.
- Revisit agreements as your child's needs and independence grow.

Visit [eSafety.gov.au/tech-agreement](https://www.esafety.gov.au/tech-agreement) to make a shared plan together.

Manage time and balance

There's no 'right' amount of time online. It's more about how gaming fits into your child's overall routine – sleep, school, physical activity and relationships. If gaming is often linked to distress, conflict or withdrawal, consider reviewing your tech agreement together.

- Protect sleep with wind-down routines and screens off before bed.
- Keep an eye on the overall pattern, not just individual sessions.
- Notice whether gaming supports connection and emotional regulation, or has a negative impact on either.

Take safety measures

Games often include features that aren't obvious from the outside.

- Check age ratings and features (for example, chat, in-app purchases, user-generated content).
- Use parental controls to manage communication and spending.
- Show your child how to mute, report and block inappropriate accounts and behaviour.
- Talk about how games create pressure to buy or keep playing.
- Work through alternatives together to promote problem solving (for example, working harder to complete a game, versus making an in-app purchase).
- Avoid saving payment details and explain why this is important.

Support positive behaviour

Online games are social spaces. Help your child think about how they treat others – and how they want to be treated.

- Talk about respect and kindness when gaming.
- Encourage your child to step away from negative or uncomfortable interactions.
- Reinforce that they don't have to respond to everyone.
- Help them recognise when communication crosses a line.

Try these conversation starters

What's the game chat like – do people generally play nice?

Who do you usually play with?

Have you seen anything in a game that didn't feel okay?

Short, regular conversations help children feel more comfortable asking for help.

If something goes wrong

If an issue comes up while gaming:

- stay calm and listen – let them know they did the right thing by telling you
- help your child step away from the interaction if needed
- use tools to mute, report or block
- decide on next steps together.

For step-by-step guidance, see [Help and support](#).

TOPIC:

Social media



Topic at a glance

What children and young people may experience:

- seeing repeated or emotionally charged content that can shape how they feel or think over time
- pressure to compare themselves to others or share personal information
- contact from people they don't know or trust
- unkind behaviour, bullying or exclusion
- design features that encourage frequent use or make it hard to switch off.

But social media can also:

- help young people connect, learn and express themselves
- support friendships and shared interests
- be positive when used with guidance and balance.

What helps

You don't need to know every app or platform. But it's important to understand how social media can affect your child, what they can do to manage it, and to keep conversations going.

Age and stage

For under-16s

Many platforms are required to take steps to prevent under-16s from having accounts. This is a delay, not a ban – it gives children more time to build the skills they need to stay safe online.

- Choose age-appropriate apps, games or websites that match their interests and support creativity, learning and wellbeing.
- Look for strong privacy settings and moderated interactions.
- Talk openly about why some platforms are ‘not yet’.
- Reassure them they can still come to you if something goes wrong.

For over-16s

As independence grows, your role shifts from monitoring to mentoring.

- Talk early and often about what they enjoy online.
- Explore how content is recommended and shaped by algorithms.
- Discuss how posts can be edited, staged or misleading.
- Encourage them to notice how social media affects their mood.
- Support them to curate their feeds and manage their time.

Model positive habits

Children learn from what we do as much as what we say.

- Pause before posting – model respectful behaviour.
- Ask before sharing photos of your child or others.
- Avoid sharing identifying details like school, location or routine.
- Use privacy settings and strong passwords or passphrases.
- Be open about mistakes and how you learn from them.

Try these conversation starters

Have you seen anything on social media lately that felt confusing or uncomfortable?

What would you do if someone was unkind or threatening online?

What do you like about this platform/app?



Keep your tone calm. Listening without judgement helps children speak up earlier.

If something goes wrong

If your child is upset or something doesn't feel right:

- start with reassurance – thank them for telling you
- help them mute, report or block using platform tools
- decide together what to do next.

Support is available even if something happens on an age-restricted platform. Your child won't be in trouble for asking for help.

For step-by-step guidance, see [Help and support](#).

TOPIC:

Harmful content and cyberbullying



Topic at a glance

What children and young people may experience:

- **Cyberbullying:** repeated or targeted unkind behaviour that can make them feel upset and unsafe, affecting confidence, mood and relationships. This can sometimes start as 'jokes' or everyday conflict, making it harder to recognise when it becomes harmful.
- **Disturbing or upsetting content:** content that is violent, graphic or emotionally overwhelming.
- **Harmful ideas or messaging:** content that promotes negative or extreme views about identity, gender, relationships or belonging.
- **Tricky experiences:** things that may feel hard to escape or talk about.

These experiences can:

- impact wellbeing, friendships and your child's sense of safety
- be difficult for children to recognise or talk about at first
- affect some children more than others, including those who may need extra support with communication, emotional regulation or managing social situations.

What helps

You don't need to monitor everything your child sees. What matters most is noticing changes early and making it easy for them to come to you.

Age and stage

- For younger children, try closer supervision and simple explanations about what is not okay.
- For primary years, support them to recognise unkind behaviour and ask for help early.
- For teens, focus on building confidence to manage situations and seek support when needed.

Stay aware and connected

- Know which platforms, apps or games your child uses.
- Check in regularly about what they're seeing and experiencing.
- Keep conversations open, calm and judgement-free.
- Notice changes in mood, behaviour or routine that might signal something is wrong.

Help your child recognise and respond

- Talk about what respectful behaviour looks like.
- Explain that repeated, targeted or hurtful behaviour is not okay.
- Help them notice when something crosses the line from 'banter' to harm.
- Encourage simple in-app actions like mute, report and block.
- Support them to step away from content that feels upsetting or overwhelming.

Strengthen support around them

- Encourage connections with trusted friends, family and other safe and supportive adults.
- Support activities outside of screens (for example, school, sport, hobbies, community).
- Reinforce that they don't have to handle things alone.
- Let them know that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Try these conversation starters



If something goes wrong

If your child is affected by harmful behaviour or content:

- stay calm and listen without judgement
- reassure them they did the right thing by telling you
- help them stop the interaction (mute, report, block or leave)
- decide together on next steps.

If your child shows ongoing distress or changes in behaviour, consider seeking additional support.

For step-by-step guidance, see [Help and support](#).

TOPIC:

Intimate or explicit material



Topic at a glance

What children and young people may experience:

- seeing adult or sexual content, sometimes accidentally or out of curiosity
- being asked to share personal or intimate images or information
- contact from someone, this may include grooming, where the person builds trust and then crosses boundaries and causes harm
- pressure, threats or fear linked to sharing or not sharing images (sometimes called ‘sextortion’)
- images or videos that have been created or changed without someone’s consent (such as deepfakes).

These situations can:

- feel confusing, embarrassing or overwhelming
- involve pressure, secrecy or manipulation
- be difficult for children to talk about without support.

What helps

You don’t need to cover everything at once. What matters most is creating a safe, open environment where your child can ask questions and seek help.

Age and stage

- For younger children, use simple language about privacy, safety and trusted adults.
- For primary years, start introducing ideas about boundaries, respect and consent.
- For teens, have more open conversations about relationships, responsibility and online behaviour.

Create a safer environment

- Use parental controls, filters and privacy settings as available.
- Keep devices in shared spaces for younger children.
- Review settings regularly as your child grows.

Keep communication open

- Have regular, low-pressure conversations about online experiences.
- Talk about privacy and not sharing personal images.
- Reassure your child they can tell you anything without getting in trouble.
- Use simple language that fits your family values. If direct terms feel difficult, start with phrases like ‘adult content’ or ‘age-inappropriate images’ and build from there.

Talk about boundaries and consent

As children grow, help them understand:

- their right to say no and how to respect other people’s boundaries
- why they need permission before sharing images of others.

Help them recognise unsafe situations

Talk about signs that something isn’t right, such as when someone:

- asks for personal information or images, or offers gifts
- wants to talk about sexual topics or keep secrets
- tries to move conversations to private platforms.

Try these conversation starters

Some online content is only for adults – have you ever seen something like that?

What would you do if someone asked for something private?

If something online didn't feel right, you can always tell me or another safe, trusted adult – you won't get in trouble.

Remind your child that if something happens, it's not their fault.

If something goes wrong

If your child sees, receives, or is pressured to share explicit material:

- stay calm, thank them for telling you and reassure them that it's not their fault
- help them stop the interaction and avoid further contact
- report then block through the platform.

If the situation involves sexual images of a child do not save, download or share the material and record key details only (such as usernames or links).

If your child shows ongoing signs of distress or changes in behaviour, seek additional support early.

For step-by-step guidance and reporting options, including support for serious online harm, see [Help and support](#).

TOPIC:

AI and what's real online



Topic at a glance

What children and young people may experience:

- fake images, videos or voices that look real (including 'deepfakes')
- chatbots, AI companions, toys or tools that seem like real people but may give inaccurate or unsafe responses
- content that is shaped to hold attention or influence emotions and behaviour.

These can be harder to recognise because:

- AI can make content feel realistic and trustworthy
- some tools respond in human-like ways
- risks often appear inside everyday apps, games and platforms.

Your child might not know that something has been AI-generated or altered, or might feel unsure about something but not be able to explain why it feels 'off'. That's why staying connected and curious matters.

What helps

You don't need to understand every new technology. The same skills from **Foundations** – like pausing, questioning and checking – help children make sense of AI and realistic-looking content.

Age and stage

- For younger children, help them understand that not everything online is real, and they can always ask a trusted adult if unsure.
- For primary years, build habits around questioning what they see and checking with others before believing or sharing.
- For teens, explore how AI works, how tools can be misused, and how to evaluate what content is accurate or trustworthy.

Help them recognise what's real

- Talk about how AI can create or change images, videos and voices, even those that appear real.
- Explain that some content is designed to look real, even when it isn't.

Explain how AI works

- Some tools respond like a real person, but they don't think, feel or understand like humans.
- AI-generated content can be convincing, even when it's wrong.
- AI tools learn from patterns – they can reflect bias, inaccuracy or harmful ideas.

Use real examples to help them understand

For instance:

- a video that looks real but has been edited or generated
- a chatbot giving advice that doesn't feel quite right
- content that keeps appearing because it's designed to hold attention.

Build on shared skills

Use the Stop • Think • Check approach from **Foundations** when something feels confusing or uncertain.

- **Stop** – pause before you click, share or reply.
- **Think** – ask: Who made this? What do they want me to do?
- **Check** – look for other sources or ask a trusted adult.

Try these conversation starters

How can you tell if something online is real or not?

Has anything online ever felt a bit confusing or 'off'?

Can you show me how this app or tool works?

**Reinforce that if something looks real,
it doesn't always mean it is.**

If something goes wrong

If your child feels confused, pressured or unsafe:

- stay calm and thank them for telling you
- help them stop the interaction and report through the platform
- decide on next steps together.

Reassurance helps children ask for help earlier. For step-by-step guidance, see [Help and support](#).

Help and support

If something goes wrong

When something happens online, your response can make a big difference.



How to respond

Children are more likely to come to you again if they feel supported the first time.

Step 1: Pause and connect

- Take a moment before reacting.
- Listen calmly and without judgement.
- Reassure your child they're not in trouble.
- Thank them for telling you.

Step 2: Work through it together

- Involve your child in deciding what to do next.
- Choose steps that match their age and needs.
- Focus on helping them feel safe and supported.

Step 3: Take practical action

Depending on the situation, this may include:

- saving key details (if needed), such as links, usernames and messages – do not save or share sexual images of a child
- reporting to the platform or to eSafety
- stopping or leaving the interaction
- muting, unfollowing, or blocking the account (after any reports).

Step 4: Check back in

- Follow up with your child after the situation settles.
- Consider revisiting your shared plan or family tech agreement.
- Seek extra support if concerns continue.

Signs it's time to check-in

Children and young people don't always tell you when something is wrong online.



What to look out for

Some changes in behaviour are a normal part of growing up – but patterns, persistent changes, or several signs together may mean it's time to check in.

You know your child best. Some children – including those with disability or additional needs – may express distress differently. Trust what you know about your child.

Emotional wellbeing

- Appearing anxious, sad, angry or distressed after using devices.
- Strong or unexpected emotional reactions.
- Ongoing changes in mood or confidence.

Routines and behaviour

- Withdrawal from usual interests, friends or activities.
- Changes in sleep patterns, appetite, energy, hygiene or concentration.
- Disruptions to their usual routine or commitments, such as missing appointments.
- Increased irritability, shutdowns or meltdowns, especially after online activity.

Online habits

- Being secretive about devices or online activities.
- Unexpected changes in friendship groups or online interactions.
- Sudden changes in how or when they use devices.
- More difficulty than usual transitioning away from screens.

Safety and contact

- Receiving gifts, attention or messages that encourage secrecy.
- Pressure to move chats to private or hidden apps.
- Requests for personal information, images or money.
- Fear, panic or urgency linked to messages or accounts.

Body and physical signals (especially for younger children)

- Feeling ‘funny’ in the tummy, shaky or tense.
- Headaches, stomach aches, hot or sick.
- Trouble sleeping after being online.

What to do

- Start with being calm and curious.
- Share what you’ve noticed.
- Listen without judgement.
- Reassure your child they won’t get in trouble for speaking up.
- Avoid punishment or sudden device removal that may shut down help seeking.

If concerns continue, see [Where to get help](#).



Where to get help

You don't have to handle things alone – support is available.



Emergency

- If a child or young person is at risk of harm right now, call Triple Zero (000).

Counselling and support

- **Kids Helpline** (ages 5 to 25, 24/7): Call 1800 55 1800 or visit [kidshelpline.com.au](https://www.kidshelpline.com.au)
- **Lifeline** (all ages, 24/7): Call 13 11 14 or visit [lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)
- **ReachOut** (ages 16 to 25, plus support for parents and carers of 12- to 18-year-olds): visit [au.reachout.com](https://www.au.reachout.com)
- **Headspace** (ages 12 to 25): Call 1800 650 890 or visit [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)

Reporting online harm

Start with reporting tools in the app, game or platform.

If the issue is serious and the platform doesn't resolve it, report to eSafety: [eSafety.gov.au/report](https://www.esafety.gov.au/report)

eSafety helps Australians deal with serious online abuse or illegal and restricted online content.

If the situation involves sexual harm or exploitation of a child, report immediately through the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE): [accce.gov.au/report](https://www.accce.gov.au/report)

Stay up to date



- Free parent webinars: [eSafety.gov.au/parents/webinars](https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/webinars)
- Resources for parents: [eSafety.gov.au/parents/resources](https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/resources)
- Parent newsletter: [eSafety.gov.au/subscribe](https://www.esafety.gov.au/subscribe)

Visit [eSafety.gov.au](https://www.esafety.gov.au) for more support options.

Disclaimer: Throughout this guide and eSafety’s website and resources, we use ‘families’ and ‘parents and carers’ to include the mums, dads, parents, carers, aunties, uncles and other supportive adults who have an important role in helping children play, learn and grow. When we talk about ‘children’ we mean everyone under 18. Sometimes we use ‘teens’ or ‘teenagers’ when we specifically mean older children, and ‘young people’ when advice could apply beyond childhood and into someone’s mid-20s.



Notes

[illegible]

