

Your neurodiverse child and the internet

A back-to-basics guide for families

This leaflet from Get Safe Online is intended to provide basic online safety advice for families of neurodiverse children.



Everyday life can be challenging enough for neurodiverse children and their families, without the added complexities brought by the internet. However, we all depend on it for so much nowadays – buying, socialising, communicating, learning, entertainment, finding information, gaming, accessing services and many other reasons – that the internet has become an integral part of all our lives. Like many families of neurodiverse children, you may also frequently depend on it to stay informed about, for example, available services, appropriate treatments and your child’s legal rights. Perhaps you seek support and guidance from online forums and support groups too.

Of course, your child may also use the internet for socialising, homework, downloading entertainment, gaming, finding information and much more. Many neurodiverse children reap additional benefits from the internet, such as enjoying quiet respite from the stresses of living with their condition and developing friendships which could be challenging in a face-to-face situation.

All children have a natural curiosity and innocence, unfortunately bringing ever-present risks when online. However, children with a learning disability can be more vulnerable to online harms because of reduced mental capacity, obsessive compulsive behaviour, social naivety and the fact they may be more comfortable having conversations online than in real life.

Whilst we need to embrace the many benefits brought by the internet, we also need to make sure that all members of the family can use it with safety and confidence. Please read our top tips which are designed to protect your child from harms like online grooming, cyberbullying and being exposed to inappropriate content, as well as being able to spend money safely and responsibly. We realise that these are not always practical depending on individual circumstances, but the more precautions you take, the more chance you will have of safeguarding your child.



Internet basics

- Explain to your child that not everybody they come across online is who seem or claim to be.
- Talk to your child about what it is and isn't OK to tell people about themselves and their family online. For example, it isn't acceptable to reveal their real name, their address, their school, their movements or photos / video of themselves. The same goes for divulging information about family members. This could be in response to questions on websites or social media, or when chatting on social media, WhatsApp or gaming platforms.
- Discuss with your child what kind of content it's OK to look at online, and what isn't, and explain why.
- Talk to your child about email, how some people use it for dishonest purposes and that they should check with you before they click on any links or attachments. The same goes for clicking on links in text messages, blogs, forums or on social media.
- Explain to your child that not everything they see or read online is factual, and before they believe anything or pass it on, they should check the information, news or story against other sources ... or ask you about it.
- Explain that there are people online who go to great lengths to persuade others to do things that aren't necessarily right.

These range from 'dares' to taking part in illegal protests, to attempting to radicalise others. Tell your child to talk to you or another responsible adult you trust if they experience anything like this.

- Talk to your child about being as respectful and polite to others online as if they were talking to them face-to-face.

Computers at home

The internet contains seemingly endless information, images and video, much of which is positive. But there is also considerable content that is inappropriate for any child - neurodiverse or not – to see. Other content may be unsuitable for your child on the basis of their condition. There are some precautions you can take to make using the internet at home safer for your child.

- Install parental filters, which are a type of software designed to control what your child can access and see. These can be standalone products but are also often bundled with internet security (or 'antivirus') software, which you should also have on your and family computers and mobile devices, including Apple devices.
- Search for and install a child-friendly browser which filters out websites featuring adult or other content you don't want your child to be exposed to. Similarly, wherever possible ensure your child is using child-friendly versions of websites and video streaming channels, such as YouTube Kids.
- Most browsers and video playback sites enable you to use a PIN to lock adult content to prevent viewing by children and young people. Consider using them.
- If possible, keep computers in a family room in a position where you can keep an eye on what your child is viewing.
- Ensure that when online, your child can attain a physical position that is comfortable and beneficial to their posture and eyesight.





Your child and mobile devices

Mobile phones and tablets make it easy for your child to go online anytime, anywhere. This is highly convenient for them but brings its own challenges.

- Talk with your child about what they use their phone for, and what is acceptable ... and what isn't.
- Talk to your child about what to do if they become concerned about something that happens when using their phone. This could include taking a screenshot of something inappropriate, upsetting or threatening that they see, reporting an incident to a website or app they're using or blocking content and / or contacts. Tell them it's OK to talk to you or another responsible adult you trust, about their concerns, and that it isn't their fault.
- Set and agree on time limits and physical locations (such as which room(s) in the home) for using their phones.
- Become familiar with the parental controls available on your child's phone as well as the filters on your home Wi-Fi. Be open with your child about that fact you're using these, and that it is to protect them.

Cyberbullying

Research indicates that children who have special educational needs are more likely to experience cyberbullying than those who do not. Follow this advice if your child has been the victim of bullying online, or if you are worried that they may be vulnerable.

- If your child tells you that they have been bullied online, keep the evidence – whether social media posts, text or other messages or emails – to make it easier to identify the culprit and report the incident(s). Try to take screenshots in case the comments are retracted at a later date. Report incidents to:
 - The provider of the platform or service where the bullying takes place, such as the social network, the mobile phone operator or the instant messaging service. Most providers have mechanisms in place for reporting bullying and other forms of abuse.
 - The police, in the case of serious and / or persistent cyberbullying, cyberstalking, trolling, harassment, grooming and other types of exploitation or extortion.
 - Your child's school, if the bullying is being carried out by a fellow student or students there. Sometimes – but not always – online bullying is an extension of bullying in the playground.



Grooming

Many children – including neurodiverse children – lack the capacity to make judgements about what information about themselves is OK to share online and what might put them at risk of various harms, also about who they meet online is genuine and who could cause them harm.

- Help your child to protect their privacy by not oversharing personal details, images and videos. This will help to safeguard them against issues like receiving inappropriate friendship or contact requests, sending or receiving inappropriate images or unwanted sexual comments or advances.

Accessing inappropriate content

Your child may be vulnerable to being persuaded to view and possibly share inappropriate or unlawful content, and / or even share intimate images and / or video of themselves. The potential consequences of such actions can be very serious and include a criminal record and inclusion on the Sex Offenders Register. The emotional effects can also be very serious, with possible outcomes including trauma, withdrawal, self-harming and even, tragically, suicide.

- Speak to your child about what online content is appropriate and inappropriate to access and share. Emphasise the serious nature of creating or live streaming of intimate acts, including on live video calls, and why.

Spending money online

Depending on your child's mental capacity and understanding of the value of money and whether they display obsessive compulsive behaviours, they could be at risk of being attracted to online platforms on which it is easy to spend money (either their own or yours). These include subscription services, gaming (for buying loot boxes and moving to higher levels) and unlocking additional features in apps.

- Talk with your child about money and its value and discuss various purchases which could provide them with more benefits and / or enjoyment.
- Think twice before letting your child use your credit or other payment cards, even for a one-off purchase.
- Disable the in-app purchases function in the settings on your mobile devices.
- Use parental controls to block access to websites which you know encourage spending, such as subscription and gaming sites. Use similar controls on gaming consoles, to disable the ability to make in-game purchases.
- If your child uses your computer, set up a guest profile to prevent them from gaining access to your online payment accounts.
- Talk to your child about recognising attempts at fraud or extortion online or on phone calls, for example if somebody they have befriended asks for money for a good cause or to get them out of trouble, exploiting your child's innocence and good nature.

Resources

As mentioned in the introduction, the information in this leaflet represents a starting point. There is a wealth of specific information and advice that you can search online to help keep your child and family protected.



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