

Esafety Parental Advice summary from Childnet International

Most children I'm in contact with reckon that they Know IT All when it comes to the internet and mobile phones, and if you are anything like me then keeping up with their use of technology is really challenging.

My eight-year-old runs rings around me when it comes to using the computer, so I know just how hard it can be to keep an eye on what children are doing online, to say nothing of what they're putting on websites, who they're chatting to and what they're downloading.

But remember right from the start, they may be 'tech literate' but you are 'life literate' – and just because your kids may be more confident than you in using the internet, they still need your involvement, advice and support.

Increasingly young people are doing their own thing on the net, like logging on to social networking sites where they can create personalised web pages to express themselves and share ideas and opinions with others. And more and more young people can access these sites direct from their mobile phones too.

These opportunities are exciting and can be really positive for children, but there are also dangers. This Childnet guide will help you to understand the risks as well as giving you the practical advice and help you need to talk to your children and support them so they can use these new communication tools safely and responsibly.

So what are the risks?

It's easy to be baffled by technology, especially with all the jargon that is around, but we prefer to keep things simple. At Childnet they've grouped the online risks to children into three categories – the three 'C's.

CONTENT

The first risk is that children are coming across unsuitable CONTENT.

There are over 15 million websites on the internet, which is one of the reasons why it is such a powerful and valuable source of information for everybody. It's like a great big library, except with sounds and pictures – and increasingly video, like this! Of course, among all the great information there is also a lot which is not suitable for children, including pornography, racist material and inaccurate information.

When it comes to protecting children from inappropriate content, a lot of parents use filtering software that can block websites, and this can certainly make a difference. But you shouldn't rely only on filtering, as it can never block everything. Even if you put a filter on your home computer, it won't stop your children using other computers or even their mobile phones to look at

websites. Never treat filtering software as a substitute for your involvement – you're the best filter for your children.

You should also realise that children can come across inappropriate material by accident – for example they may be sent links to bad websites through junk e-mail, or may make a mistake in searching for a website – so don't overreact if you see it on the screen.

Children like to copy, or download, things that they find online, so it's important to remind them that downloading and sharing copyrighted content without the permission of the author is illegal. This is especially a problem on file-sharing networks.

And finally, remind your children that not everything they read online is necessarily true.

If you come across something on the web that you think is illegal, like images of child abuse or racist writing, then you can report this through a special online hotline. In the UK this is the Internet Watch Foundation at **www.iwf.org.uk**, while **www.inhope.org** has details of hotlines in other countries.

CONTACT

Of all the benefits of the internet and mobile phones, staying in touch with friends and family is perhaps one of the greatest. Young people love it, but unfortunately it is also potentially one of the riskiest activities because they often don't know who they are really talking to.

The second set of risks for children is the risk of inappropriate CONTACT, with children emailing or chatting to someone on the internet who may wish to bully or – although it is rare – abuse them, either online or by arranging to meet.

Increasingly children are being cyber-bullied by other children through text messages, emails or messages posted to social networking sites.

When it comes to protecting your children from inappropriate contact it is vital that you teach them to keep their personal details private and not to give out over the internet their full name, age, where they live, the school they attend or their mobile phone number. If they are signing up for a social networking site it's important to talk to them about making their profile private and not to share personal photographs or their intimate thoughts with people they don't know in real life. Remind children that people on the internet may not be who they say they are – and that they are still strangers, no matter how long they have been talking to them or how friendly they seem.

Just as you check up when your child is going out of the house, you also need to find out where your children are going and who they are talking to online.

Teach your children never to meet unsupervised anyone they have only had contact with via the internet. If they really do want to meet someone and they have discussed this with you, it's vital that you go with them and that you meet the person in a public place.

If your child is being bullied online or through their mobile phone, then start by telling your internet service provider or phone operator. It helps if you keep a record of the conversations. If the bullying is coming from fellow students, you should report this to your child's school. There are also children's helplines, like ChildLine in the UK [0800 11 11]. A good website which lists the child helplines throughout the world is www.childhelplineinternational.org.

If you know of a child who is in immediate danger and you need an urgent response, call the local police. If you suspect that your child is being groomed by a stranger over the internet or feel that there is inappropriate behaviour going on, you can report this through a special '**Virtual Global Task Force**' website. Again, see the screen here for the website address.

COMMERCIALISM

The third risk to children in Childnet's list of Cs is that of excessive COMMERCIALISM. There is a great deal of advertising and marketing on the internet, and young people's privacy can easily be invaded. Children can receive unwanted adverts and marketing e-mail and text messages – often called SPAM – and they can easily sign up for expensive ring tones or premium rate telephone services.

When it comes to protecting children from excessive commercialism online, make sure you have installed the latest anti-spyware and firewall programs on your computer. Then learn how to delete pop-ups and block SPAM emails and teach your children not to reply to SPAM junk mail. You can learn how to do this from websites such as these.

It is important to remind your children to keep their personal information private. Consider using a family email address when filling in online forms – that way you can monitor what further e-mails you receive.

Lastly, talk to your children about the adverts and marketing messages they are receiving online and teach them that if a deal sounds too good to be true ... it probably is!

Summing up

I hope we've given you some ideas about the benefits and risks children face when using the internet and mobile phones. We have tried not to confuse you with information about specific applications or technical terminology, but it is important that you take the time to learn about these too.

This is where Childnet's 'Know IT All for Parents' guide will help. It contains detailed advice on some of the things children are doing online, such as social

networking websites, Instant Messaging and peer-to-peer networks. If you are new to computers, it has a special tutorial which will show you how to find and bookmark your favourite websites for children and how to search more safely. There is also content written and presented by young people for young people. See www.childnet-int.org/kia for more information.

Caring for your children online starts offline, with you playing your part as a good parent or carer and listening and learning from your children. This is where the real communication has to begin.

Make sure your children can talk to you at any time. It is true that they can come across inappropriate websites or be approached by strangers who wish them ill. As they grow up they will start to make new friends online, and soon they will be buying from websites. That's why it is so important to make this a genuine conversation.

Keep the computer in a family room and make sure your children know they can talk to you at any time and that you won't overreact or blame them if they get out of their depth or make mistakes. Show you admire and appreciate their skills, and promote the positive ways in which the internet can be used for their entertainment, creativity and study.

And if you don't know how something works, then do what I do – get them to show you. You'll be surprised at how much you can learn together. Keep talking to your children and soon you'll 'know it all' as a family.