

# Keeping children safe online during the COVID-19 pandemic





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The global impact of COVID-19 means young people will be spending more time at home – and more time online. There are lots of great ways children can use connected devices to learn and play, but there are also risks.

As parents and carers, you have the best opportunity to support and guide your children to avoid online risks and have safer experiences. Governments and industry also have a role to play in making sure the online world is a safe place to be.

In these uncertain times, children may feel isolated or anxious, and might see family members disturbed by the COVID-19 impacts. Away from school, children have less access to their usual support systems including friends, teachers and counsellors. If possible, it could be useful to reach out to your child's regular support people to check if they can provide online or telephone support.

This advice covers some of the key online safety issues for young people and includes a range of practical tips and advice on what to do if things go wrong. It covers common online safety issues like managing time online, using parent controls and setting and responding to issues like cyberbullying, inappropriate content, sending nudes and contact from strangers.

Please note: these materials have been created by Australia's eSafety Commissioner for international use. The material is therefore general in nature. It is made available on the understanding that the eSafety Commissioner is not engaged in rendering professional advice.



\*[Highlighted text denotes an editable section of the PDF]

## How to help kids stay safe online

Even if you are at home together, it is not possible to monitor your child's online activities every second of the day. It is important to talk with them about online safety issues to help develop their critical thinking and ability to make good choices.

Here are 10 top tips to help protect your children online:

1. **Build an open trusting relationship around technology** – keep communication open and supportive so your child knows they can come to you if something goes wrong or does not feel right online.
2. **Co-view and co-play** with your child online. This will help you better understand what they are doing and why they enjoy an app, game or website, as well as providing a great opportunity to start conversations about online safety.
3. **Build good habits** and help your child to develop digital intelligence and social and emotional skills – such as respect, empathy, critical thinking, responsible behaviour and resilience – and practice being good online citizens.
4. **Empower your child** – wherever possible, help them make wise decisions for themselves, rather than telling them what to do. Try to provide them with strategies for dealing with negative online experiences that will build their confidence and resilience.
5. **Use devices in open areas of the home** – this can help you manage and be aware of who your child interacts with online through phones, tablets, smart TVs, gaming consoles and other connected devices.
6. **Set time limits** that balance time spent in front of screens with offline activities – a [family technology plan](#) can help you to manage expectations around where and when technology use is allowed – search online for [templates](#) or examples.
7. **Know the apps, games and social media sites your kids are using**, making sure they are age-appropriate, and learn how to limit [messaging or online chat](#) and [location-sharing](#) functions within apps or games, as these can expose your child to unwanted contact and disclose their physical location. For more advice:
  - [The eSafety Guide](#) includes information to help parents and carers choose safer apps and report and block unwanted contact and sexual approaches.
  - [Common Sense Media](#) provides an app guide that helps parents and carers choose safer apps. It also offers specific [COVID-19 resources](#) about navigating social distancing and school closures using quality media and at-home learning opportunities.
  - [Net Aware](#) provides a guide to social networks, apps and games to keep children safe online.
8. **Check the privacy settings** on the games and apps your child is using and make sure their profiles are turned on to the strictest privacy setting. Restrict who can contact your child or ask them to check in with you before accepting new friends.
9. **Use available technologies** to set up parental controls on devices that can filter harmful content, monitor your child's use and limit or block their time on connected devices or functions (e.g. cameras, in-app purchases).
10. **Be alert to signs of distress** and know where to go for more [advice and support](#).

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## Media, misinformation and scams

At present, it is difficult to visit a website, turn on a television, listen to a radio or open a newspaper without being confronted by COVID-19. Even social media apps have introduced links and pop ups for information about the virus. While it is important to stay informed, it is just as important to be mindful of the fake news and misinformation that is being spread across the internet.

### How can I protect my child?

- **Select one or two trustworthy and reputable information sources** for your news, to avoid false reports and unscientific claims. The major news services provide regular online, television and radio bulletins.
- **Encourage your child to check** how reliable and credible the sources are.
- **Teach them skills** like respect, responsibility, resilience and critical reasoning – it is never too early to instill good habits and these skills will help them make sense of the information they are consuming.
- **Set safety, security and privacy settings** on devices, games and apps at an age-appropriate level.
- **Be aware of scams** and teach your child how to spot and avoid [online scams](#).
- **Set boundaries around your own screen use** and stick to them – this can help maintain balance and provide a positive example for your child.
- **Be an upstander** by calling out bad behaviour and ensuring that the content you share online is respectful and honest.
- **Ensure they know where they can turn to for help** – you can have more conversations about online safety at home, tell them about helplines or support networks, or provide them with the tips listed in this advice.

### What can I do if my child is feeling scared or anxious?

- **Turn off notifications** and use apps or built-in features to monitor or limit how much time you and your child spend online.
- **Try other activities** like reading something you enjoy or playing games.
- **Look for positive stories of people** who are working to minimise COVID-19, caring for sick people, showing acts of kindness or collaborating in community efforts.
- **Reach out to people in your child's support network** to see if they can provide online or telephone support.
- **Regularly check in** to see if your child is okay. Let them know that you are there for them and that they can talk to you anytime. Then do something fun together!

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## Time online

If your child is using online platforms or programs for schoolwork, ensuring a healthy balance between non-school related online activities and offline time is especially important.

Here are some helpful tips:

- During non-school hours at home, establish time limits around when and for how long your child can be online.
- Use the available technologies – parental controls and tools to monitor online time allow you to measure and set time limits on device use or internet access. Be honest and open about why you want to use these technologies.
- Turn off notifications for social media apps to help minimise distractions.
- Depending on your child's age, you can establish a [family tech agreement](#) that balances time spent in front of screens with offline activities. You can find templates by searching online.
- Include 'offline' activities in your routine at home – this can include family exercise, reading time or board games.
- Reduce your own time online to model positive behaviour!

Increased connectivity may have negative health impacts. Signs to watch for include:

- tiredness, sleep disturbance, headaches, eye strain
- changes in eating patterns
- reduced personal hygiene
- constantly talking about particular online programs, such as a gaming site
- extreme anger when being asked to take a break from online activity
- appearing anxious or irritable when away from the computer/device
- becoming withdrawn from friends and family.

If you notice your child experiencing these issues, you might need to take further steps to help encourage balance. Consider contacting [online or telephone counsellors](#) or calling your local doctor for advice.

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## Use parental controls and safe search options

Parental controls are software tools that allow you to monitor and limit what your child sees and does online. They can be used to filter harmful content, such as 'adult' or sexual material, and to monitor, time-limit or block your child's use of connected devices and functions such as cameras.

While parental controls can be effective tools to help control and limit what your child does online, they are not foolproof. There is no substitute for active parental engagement and oversight of a child's online activities. Helping your child build good online safety habits is just as important.

### How do I use parental controls?

- Check if your wi-fi router has software that allows you to set up parental controls across your whole family wi-fi network.
- Search online for reputable child-friendly wi-fi products using terms like 'child friendly routers', 'child friendly wi-fi', 'family friendly routers' and 'child safe wi-fi'.
- Check out the parental controls available on most tablets, smartphones, computers, TVs and gaming consoles. Look at: [Windows](#), [Mac OS](#), [Apple](#) (from iOS12), Android using [Google Play](#) or [Google Family Link](#).
- Use the PIN code locking feature on smart TVs or disconnecting the TV from the internet if you are not using the 'smart' features.
- Use parental controls to limit your child's cellular/mobile data usage.
- Use the parental control measures on streaming services and gaming consoles to help manage gaming activity. Search for the streaming service or console name and 'parental controls' to see your options.
- Download or purchase family safety controls or filters. To find a filter that is right for you, search online using terms like 'internet filters' or 'family filters' and check out its reviews.
- Set up child-friendly search engines or select safe search settings on digital devices to help prevent your child from stumbling across inappropriate sites and content.

### Safe browsing tips

- Encourage younger children to always ask an adult before clicking on an 'Accept', 'Allow' or 'OK' button on a website as sites may display other messages or disclaimers that require a response.
- Set up bookmarks in your child's browser for sites you would like them to use.
- Learn how to adapt filtering tool settings to reflect each user's age and skills if multiple members of your family share a device or program.
- Be aware that many search engines also contain advertising and know there is always a risk that inappropriate material could still slip through.

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## Unwanted contact and grooming

During this time, children are likely to be learning, playing and socialising online – which can be a great way to build friendships and stay connected. With more people engaging online, it is even more important to ensure all the conversations they have are safe, healthy and wanted. Parents and carers need to keep an eye out for unwanted contact and know how to respond.

Unwanted contact is any online communication that makes your child feel uncomfortable or unsafe, even if they initially welcomed the contact. It can come from a stranger, an online ‘friend’ or even someone they actually know. At worst, it can involve ‘grooming’ – building a relationship with the child to sexually abuse them.

### How can I minimise the risks to my child?

- **Make their accounts private** – suggest that your child makes their social media accounts private or revises their privacy settings regularly.
- **Delete contacts they don’t talk to** – ask them to go through all the people who follow, or are friends with them, on social media and check that they actually know them.
- **Report and block** – if your child receives any unwanted contact from either someone they know or a stranger, encourage them to report and block the person.
- **Delete requests from strangers** – encourage your child to delete friend or follow requests from people they don’t know.

### What else can I do to protect my child?

- **Stay involved in your child’s digital world** – keep up-to-date with the websites, apps and online chat services they are using, and explore them together.
- **Build an open trusting relationship** – keep communication open and calm so they know they can come to you when someone is asking them to do something that does not feel right.
- **Help your child to protect their privacy** – encourage your child to use their privacy settings on social media sites to restrict their online information to known friends only.
- **Teach your child to be alert to signs of inappropriate contact** – help them recognise signs that an online ‘friend’ may be trying to develop an inappropriate relationship, such as asking:
  - lots of questions about personal information soon after meeting online
  - if they would like to meet in person
  - which room their computer is in
  - for favours and doing things in return (abusers often use promises and gifts to gain trust).
- **Establish safety guidelines for meeting online ‘friends’** – explain that it is safest to keep online ‘friends’ online. If they do want to meet someone face-to-face once health restrictions are removed, they should discuss it with you first. Let them know they should be accompanied by you or another trusted adult.
- **What to do if something goes wrong** – talk to them without being judgemental or angry and make them feel like they can come to you with anything, without fear of being punished or criticised. Find out what happened and act to protect your child.
- **Call the police** if you think your child is at risk of being groomed or their physical safety is at risk. Police often have hotlines where you can report abuse or online grooming – search online for services in your area.
- **Get help and support** for your child from an [online or telephone counselling and support service](#).

[INSERT LOCAL/IN-COUNTRY SUPPORT LINKS AND HOTLINES HERE]

## Online pornography

With kids spending more time online while at home, there are increased chances that your child may discover online pornography unintentionally or may go looking for it.

### How can I protect my child?

- **Set some 'house rules'** – have an age-appropriate discussion about the issue with your children and talk about where and when it is OK to use computers and devices.
- **Stay engaged** – talk regularly and openly with your child about what they are doing online – this helps build trust.
- **Use the available technology** – take advantage of the parental controls available on devices and ensure the 'safe search' mode is enabled on browsers.
- **Build resilience** – talk about sexualised content as this can help young people process what they come across online and reinforce the importance of consent and respectful relationships.
- **Consider raising the subject of pornography yourself** – parenting experts recommend starting the conversation early (by the time they are around 9 years old) to help protect them from the potential impacts of coming across it accidentally. Every child is different, so decide when you think it is right to raise the subject with your child
- **Take a long-term view** – reinforce that if your child does see something they do not understand, they can come and ask you about it.

### What can I do if my child has found pornography online?

- **Stay calm** – thank them for being brave enough to let you know and reassure them that you will sort it out together.
- **Listen, assess, pause** – ask your child how they found it, where it happened, who (if anyone) showed it to them and how they felt when they saw it. Resist the urge to give a lecture.
- **Reassure your child they are not in trouble** – try not to remove your child's device or online access completely, as they will see it as punishment.
- **Be sensitive to how they feel** – it is important to talk with your child about how the content made them feel. Encourage them to talk to you about any questions they have.
- **Talk about the importance of consent and respect in relationships** – talk about the importance of always having permission to touch, hug or kiss another person.

[INSERT LOCAL/IN-COUNTRY SUPPORT LINKS AND HOTLINES HERE]

## Sending nudes and sexting

Social distancing and isolation can be hard on all relationships. This applies for young love too. While your child might think that sending nudes and sexting is a way to flirt or be intimate while at home, particularly if they're in a relationship, it is important to talk about the possible consequences of sending or sharing nude images.

These risks include:

- **Losing control of the image** and having their intimate images shared beyond the intended audience, even in trusted relationships.
- **Peer pressure and disrespect** if by being forced or pressured into sending explicit images or videos.
- **Psychological and emotional harms**, including humiliation, bullying, teasing, harassment or damage to their reputation.
- **Criminal charges or penalties** for some cases – in particular, the sharing of non-consensual intimate images.

### How can I minimise the risks to my child?

- **Talk to your child** about how to stay connected with friends and loved ones in safe and age-appropriate ways.
- **Talk about the risks** – what can go wrong and the legal issues. Remind your child that once an image is shared, it is almost impossible to get it back or to control how it is further distributed.
- **Promote self-confidence and that it is OK to say 'no'** – let them know that they don't have to give in to peer pressure to send intimate images or messages just because others do, or because their boyfriend or girlfriend has asked them to.
- **Teach your child about consent and respectful relationships** – help them understand the impact of sharing someone else's intimate images or messages and that sharing without consent means they are breaking that person's trust.

### What can I do if my child's intimate image is shared online?

- **Stay calm and open** – reassure them that you will work through this together.
- **Listen, and act fast** – there can be legal issues when intimate images of children are shared. Work quickly to remove the content online by reporting the image to the site or service it was posted on. There may be a hotline or service in your country to support you to remove images.
- **Get help and support** – look after your child's wellbeing and encourage them to speak with an [online or telephone counselling and support service](#).

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## Cyberbullying

Children who are bored by long periods at home can pick at each other, and that happens online too. So it is important to keep an eye out for cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying behaviour can include mean posts, comments and messages about a child, or deliberately leaving them out of online group activities. Cyberbullying can make social isolation worse and the longer it continues, the more stressed the child can become, impacting on their emotional and physical wellbeing.

Here are some helpful tips:

- Remember, when they are away from school, children have less access to their usual support systems including friends, teachers and counsellors.
- Talk to your child about cyberbullying before it happens. Together you can work out strategies to address potential issues and reassure them you will be there to offer support.
- Watch out for signs such as your child or teen appearing upset or anxious after using their mobile, tablet or computer, being unusually secretive about their online activities or becoming withdrawn.

### What can I do if my child is being cyberbullied?

As a parent, your first instinct may be to ban your child from social media, disable the wi-fi or turn off the data access. But this could make the problem worse by making your child feel as if they are being punished and heightening their sense of social exclusion.

There are five simple steps that can help minimise harm:

1. **Listen, think, stay calm** – talk about what happened, try to remain open and non-judgemental, ask your child how they feel and ensure they feel heard.
2. **Collect evidence** of the cyberbullying material – it is a good idea to collect evidence, such as screenshots, of the bullying behaviour, in case you need to report it later on.
3. **Report the cyberbullying** to the social media service where it is occurring – many social media services, games, apps and websites allow you to report abusive content and request that it is removed
4. **Block the offending user** – advise your child and others not to respond to bullying messages as this can inflame the situation. Help your child block or unfriend the person sending the messages.
5. **Get help and support** – check in with your child regularly about how they are feeling. If you notice any changes that concern you, get help through an [online or telephone counselling and support service](#).

[INSERT LOCAL/IN-COUNTRY SUPPORT LINKS AND HOTLINES HERE]

## Online gaming

Online games can be great fun and a good way to help children stay connected to friends while at home. Games can also improve coordination, problem-solving and multi-tasking skills, as well as help children build social skills through online interactivity with other players.

For a healthy balance, encourage offline as well as online games and activities, such as home exercise, playing board games, drawing and reading books.

If your child is online gaming, it is important to be aware of risks, including:

- spending too much time gaming, which can have negative impacts on your child's health, ability to study, and social and emotional wellbeing
- cyberbullying and grooming through online or in-game chat
- games with gambling-like elements which can normalise gambling for young people
- costs of in-game spending.

### What can I do?

- **Prepare** – locate the computer, device or games console in an open area of your home and use available parental controls and safety features for devices, browsers and apps.
- **Stay involved** – talk regularly with your child about their gaming interests and who they play with online. If you're also spending time at home, now might be the time to play alongside your child to get a better sense of how they handle their personal information and who they communicate with. Gaming with your child can also be fun!
- **Be aware of what they are playing** – games vary in their level of violent or sexual content, and may contain themes, language and images that are unsuitable for your child.
- **Build good habits** – help your child protect their personal information by using an appropriate screen name that does not reveal their real name. Teach them not to click on links provided by strangers or to use 'cheat' programs to help with game play, which can contain viruses or malware.
- **Empower your child** – wherever possible, help them make wise decisions for themselves, rather than telling them what to do. Try to provide them with strategies for dealing with negative online experiences that will build their confidence and resilience.
- **Agree on strategies to help them switch off** – for example, a timer that signals game time is nearly over, with consequences for not switching off.
- **Learn how to help** if your child has experienced bullying or unwanted contact when gaming.

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## Help seeking and self-care

We are all living in extraordinary times, dealing with changes in the way we interact and live. Even if your health has not been directly impacted by COVID-19, the physical restrictions, emotional stresses and financial pressure may be making it difficult to cope – and for many people, keeping children home is adding to the tension.

### What can I do to look after myself?

- Seek out [targeted advice for parents and carers](#) to support you during times of isolation and confinement.
- Manage your expectations: you may not be as productive if you are working from home without your usual equipment and routine, or with family interrupting you.
- Allow extra time for everything: with fewer people providing customer service and more shopping online for groceries, medicines and deliveries of food there are likely to be delays and cancellations. Plan ahead and think of some alternatives in case what you want is unavailable.
- Long periods of time at home with family members (or housemates) can strain even the best relationships and make negative ones far worse. If you need help, contact [online or telephone counselling and support service](#).
- Online social contact can be a lifeline. However, if you are experiencing domestic or family violence, remember that devices and digital technology can be used for [technology-facilitated abuse](#), so it is important to take [steps to increase your personal safety](#) when it is safe to do so.

If you think a friend or family member is having a difficult time at home during this challenging period try to help them while protecting yourself – as a start, you could share the information in this section with them.

[INSERT LOCAL/IN-COUNTRY SUPPORT LINKS AND HOTLINES HERE]

