

eSafety

Early Years

Online safety for under 5s





We SAY and SHARE online

We MAKE and DO online

We WATCH and EXPLORE online

Online safety for under 5s

As parents and carers, online safety begins with you.

Young children are online before we know it. They are playing with connected toys, tapping and swiping touch screens, choosing programs to watch on streaming services, video calling family and friends, playing games and sharing photos and video.

Being online has many benefits for young children, including opportunities to explore their creativity, improve their language skills, solve problems, think critically and build relationships.

But there may be risks if young children use connected devices without supervision or for extended periods of time. They may accidentally come across inappropriate content or be exposed to contact from people they don't know. They may share personal information or images. As they grow older, they could experience cyberbullying.

By talking to your child about online safety now you lay the foundations for safer online experiences as they grow older.

This guide covers key online safety issues for children from birth to 5 and includes a range of practical tips and advice on how to support and guide them to be safe online.

[eSafety.gov.au/early-years](https://esafety.gov.au/early-years)

Key advice





Be safe

Help your child understand the connected world and how they can protect their personal information.

Set up devices safely and ensure they are only used in communal areas

Children need to be protected from exposure to content that is not age appropriate. The best way to do this is to use parental controls and safe search settings on the devices, apps and online accounts they use. See our advice on how to set up devices safely later on.

However, parental controls and filters are not failsafe. Ensure your child only uses devices in communal areas of your home, where their activities can be supervised.

Talk to your child about the connected world

While your child may not understand the internet or data sharing, starting the conversation early helps to build their understanding of how people and technologies connect (or 'talk') to one another online. This means they could be contacted by strangers or people who pose a risk. Identify who 'safe people' are, like family and close friends. Babies can begin to grow their understanding of the connected world through video calls with

grandparents or other family members. For toddlers and preschoolers, using airplane mode on Apple and Android devices is a great way to teach them about what is 'online' and what is 'offline'.

Teach your child about personal information

Make sure your child knows what their 'personal information' is. This includes their full name, date of birth, address, contact information and photos that identify them. Explain that personal information should not be shared with anyone they don't know. Talk with toddlers and preschoolers about what information and images are OK to share and what needs to be kept private.





Be kind

Show your child how to be kind and respectful online and model good habits around device use and online sharing.

Encourage positive online behaviour

Encourage children to be kind and respectful online. With babies you can model basic online and offline social interactions, like saying please, thank you, hello and goodbye. With toddlers and preschoolers, you can model and praise good online social interactions. You can also explain that being kind online helps to ensure that everyone has a good time. Talk to preschoolers about the risks of cyberbullying as they get older and let them know you are there if someone is ever mean to them online.

Model good habits around device use

As you pick up your phone and focus on the screen, your child is watching and learning from you. Even very young babies are aware of the presence of screens and the attention and amount of time their parents devote to them. By demonstrating that you can put your phone down and concentrate on your child, you provide a really important model for them, no matter how old they are.

Model consent when taking and sharing photos of your child

As often as you can, ask your child if they would like to be in a photo before you take it. Do the same before you share a photo, video or write something about them on social media. Let them know who will see it, why you want to share it and respect their decision if they don't want to share it.

It may seem silly to do this with younger children, but the point is to model consent and respectful data sharing practices from an early age. This practice will come in handy when they start to share photos online.

Be mindful of what you share online about your child, as this may form part of their lasting digital footprint.





Ask for help

Teach your child to ask for help and let them know they can come to you with any issue.

Teach your child when to ask for help

As you explore and play online alongside your child, teach them to ask for help. Let them know they should always tell a trusted adult, like a parent, grandparent or their educator. They should ask for help if they are contacted by anyone online (including people they know), if they encounter a pop-up, if they are unsure about anything, or if they see or hear something that makes them feel uncomfortable, scared or upset.

Let your child know they won't be in trouble if they ask for help

Talking with children about what they watch and do during screen time is key to their online safety. Remind them you are always there if they need help with anything. Reassure toddlers and preschoolers they will not be in trouble if they ask you for help about anything they encounter online.

Teach your child to ask before doing anything new online

Teach your child to ask permission before they watch a new program, play a new game, explore a new website or download anything onto a device. Tell toddlers and preschoolers to 'ask before they tap' or do anything new.







Make good choices

Help your child to think critically about the content they watch and how they spend their time online.

Explore quality content together and encourage critical thinking

Get involved and take the time to sit with your child and watch their favourite program or play their favourite game together. Ask toddlers and preschoolers questions and be curious about their answers. Why do they like it? Why do they want to watch or play it? Tell them why you like it or don't like it.

Encourage them to think critically and question things. Inject more variety into their screen time by following their interests and choosing quality content you can explore together.

Build good habits together

How devices are used and managed in your home is important. Decide on the right amount of screen time for your child (see our advice later on) and talk with toddlers and preschoolers about a 'time's up' strategy. You could use a timer and involve them in the process of setting the timer. It is also important to set clear rules about where devices can be used in your home and at what times.

Decide on the right level of supervision for online activities

Decide which activities will be 'explore together', 'supervised' and 'independent'. All new apps, games and content should be 'explore together' activities, in which you sit with your child and play or watch together. During 'supervised' activities toddlers and preschoolers can control the activity, while you remain nearby and talk with them about what they are doing. Once you and your toddler or preschooler know a game or app really well, it may be appropriate for them to engage in 'independent' activities, while you are nearby.



How to set up a device with safety in mind



Before young children begin to explore online, it is a good idea to activate safety features, filters and parental controls on the devices they use.

No parental control or safe search filter is 100% effective. Helping your child build good online safety habits is just as important.

Passphrase protect devices

Add a passphrase or passcode, that only you know, to any device your child uses. If a device uses fingerprint or face authentication, don't set this up for your child. It is important that you control and have access to all devices that your child uses.

Parental controls and shared accounts

Parental controls are software tools that allow you to monitor and limit what your child sees and does online. They could be specific to different devices, such as mobiles, tablets, computers, gaming consoles and smart TVs, or they may be available in different apps or programs, such as streaming services, web browsers and search engines. Parental controls may also be available on your home wi-fi network.

If a device, app or service is shared by multiple members of your family, you may be able to change the filters or privacy settings to reflect each user's age and skills. This is often done through a 'family' or shared account.

Parental controls and shared accounts can be set up to do things like:

Block — you may be able to block your child from accessing you may be able to block your child from accessing specific websites, apps or functions (like using a device's camera or buying things online).

Filter — you may be able to restrict access to different kinds of content, such as 'adult' or inappropriate content.

Monitor — you may be able to monitor your child's use of connected devices or apps, with reports on the content they access and the sites they visit, including how often and for how long.



Be safe



Be kind



Ask for help



Make good choices

Safe search

It's common to use search engines and AI chatbots to find information online, but that comes with the risk of children seeing material that's not suitable for them. Where possible, it's a good idea to activate any 'safe search' options in the service, to filter the results and responses so they don't include inappropriate or explicit content like pornography.

Screen time monitors

Screen time monitors allow you to set time limits that block your child's access to a device, app or online service after a set period of time.

Alarm clocks, kitchen timers and stop watches work just as well, and can be a useful way of involving your child in setting time limits.

Safety tips

Use bookmarks — set up bookmarks in the web browser your child uses. This may help minimise the risk of them coming across unsuitable websites and content.

Set up a folder — on shared devices, set up a folder of apps or programs that are suitable for your child to use.

Airplane mode — turn on airplane or flight mode on Apple and Android mobile devices to restrict access to some online services.

Step-by-step guides

For more information on setting up devices safely go to [eSafety.gov.au/parents/issues-and-advice/parental-controls](https://esafety.gov.au/parents/issues-and-advice/parental-controls)



Screen time and screen practices

Good screen practices are important for the overall health and wellbeing of young children.

Good screen practices for young children centre on the quality and nature of their activity online, as well as parents and carers modelling good screen habits and being actively engaged in their child's screen time.



Be actively engaged

Engaging in quality content with your child can be a positive experience for them and can promote learning and development.

Decide which activities will be ‘explore together’, ‘supervised’ and ‘independent’.

The level of supervision required will depend on the nature of the activity and the readiness of your child.

Explore together

These are activities in which you sit alongside your child and you are both fully engaged. The screen remains within your sight at all times. Explore together activities should include all new games, apps, websites and programs.

- Describe what you are thinking and doing and ask questions — ‘I wonder what will happen when we tap here?’
- Practice taking turns with your child.

Supervised

During supervised activities your child is the one controlling the screen, but they are talking to you about what they are watching or doing. You may be nearby in the same room engaged in another activity, like cooking, as you talk with them. Supervised activities should involve content your child is familiar with.

- If a game or activity can be played offline, turn airplane mode on or disconnect from wi-fi.
- Ask lots of questions and encourage your child to show you things, so you can stay engaged in what they are doing.

Independent

When your child is engaged in independent activities, they are watching and exploring online by themselves. You are still nearby in the same room. Independent activities should only include games, apps, websites and programs you and your child know really well.

- Make sure your child knows they can come to you if they are unsure about anything or they see or experience something that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Check in with your child every so often and ask what they are doing or watching.



How to balance screen time

How much time should your child spend online?
You know your child.

Consider your child's screen use in the context of their overall health and wellbeing. The Department of Health provides recommendations in its 24-Hour Movement Guidelines on levels of physical activity, sedentary activity (such as screen time), and sleep for children.

Tips for managing screen time

You may be accustomed to 'tech tantrums', or your toddler or preschooler having a tantrum because their screen time is over. It is normal behaviour for children to not want to stop a fun activity, whether it is online or not.

Talk about a set amount of screen time before your child starts to play or watch — this may help them stop when their time is up.

Use a timer — decide on the right amount of time and use a timer or a screen time monitor that blocks access. This is especially useful for very young children as they see it as the device 'turning off', not you imposing a rule.

Help them transition to another activity — in the last five minutes of your child's screen time, sit with them and engage with what they are doing. You could also suggest you draw or make a character from your child's favourite program or game together.

Agree on device-free times — talk together as a family about when everyone should put their devices down. Depending on your routine, this may be during meals and at night.

Turn off devices an hour before bedtime — research shows it is important to turn devices off at least an hour before bedtime to ensure your child has the best quality sleep.



Where to go for good content

Parents and carers have an important role to play in shaping what their children watch and do online. Sometimes it's quality not quantity that matters most.

Many online streaming services use viewing algorithms that respond to the choices and interactions children make by serving them more of the content they like.

If your child spends a lot of time watching just one type of program or playing the same game, then it might be time to add a bit more variety. Encourage your child to make active choices and talk about what they watch and engage with online.

Quality content means different things to different people, so decide what is important to you and your family and try to inject a little more of this into your child's screen time.

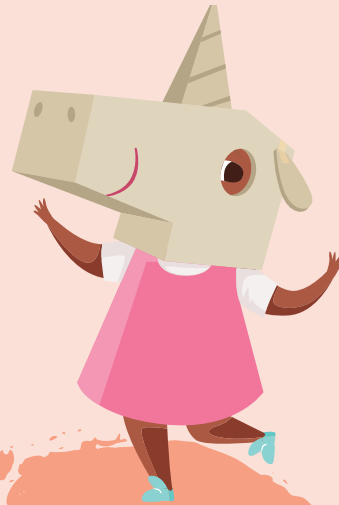
Depending on their age, you could suggest they search for different things or help them type different search terms, or you could turn to trusted providers of safe and high-quality children's programming and online content.



What to look for

Look for apps, games and content that:

- foster values of friendship and respect
- provide opportunities for learning, such as recognising sounds, pictures and letters
- promote creativity and exploration, rather than repetitive actions
- include a balance of female and male characters



Family tech agreement

It takes a whole family to be safe online.

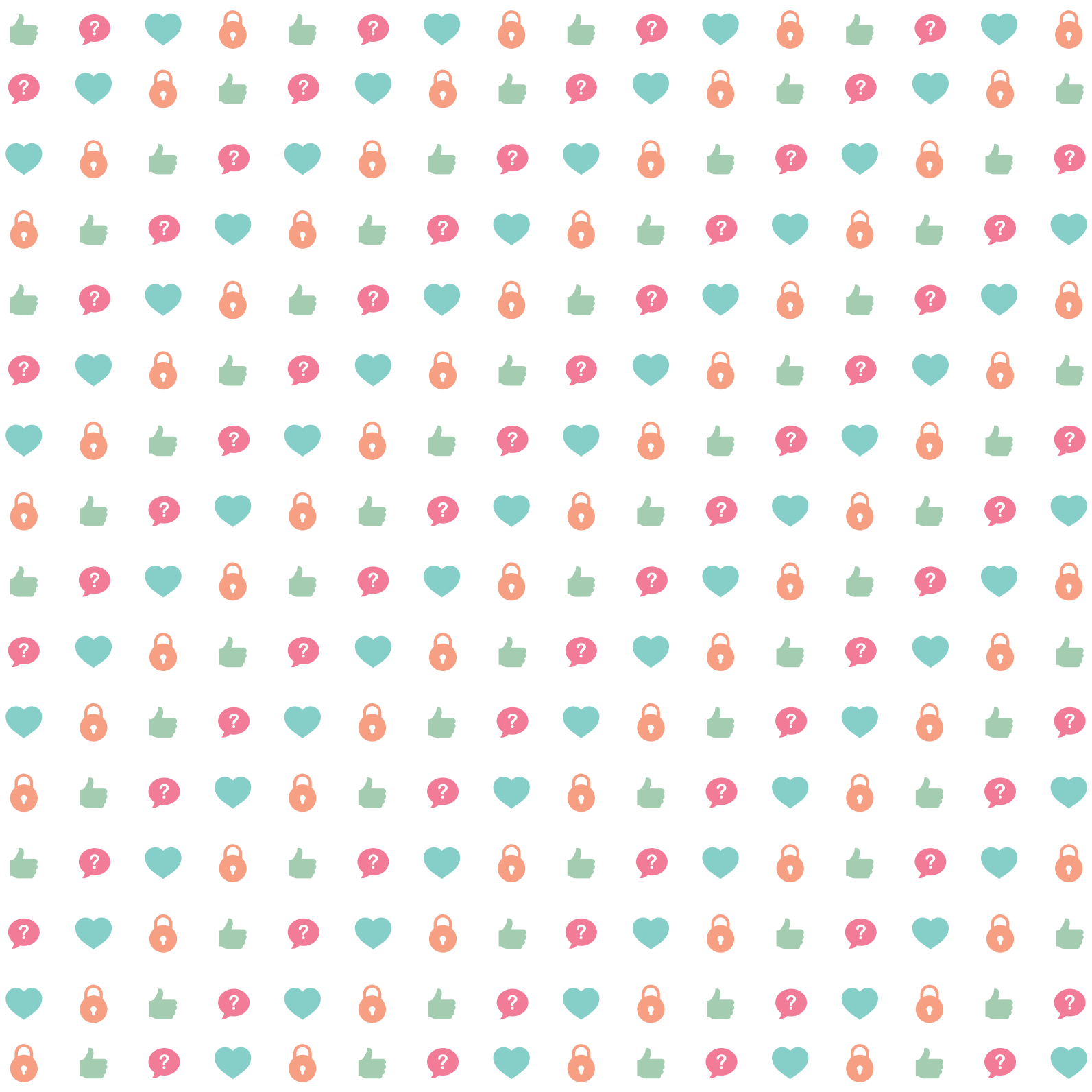
A family tech agreement is a set of rules about how devices, like mobiles, tablets, computers, TVs and gaming consoles are used in your home. It is written down and agreed to by all family members.

When your child is around 3, it is a good idea to make a family tech agreement. At this age, children are recognising rules, so you can build on this understanding in a fun way to talk about online safety and set some rules. As children grow older, or if your situation changes, it is a good idea to revise your agreement together.

You can use the family tech agreement on our website, which is specifically tailored for younger children and includes pictures to help explain the rules. Or you can use our template to create your own, with different rules for children of different ages, and pictures that suit your particular situation and family.

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