

Quick reference guide

Online communities, special interests and relationships – the hidden risks

For many teenagers and younger children, the online world is a space where they can explore passions, find ‘their people,’ and feel understood. But being online carries hidden risks when boundaries are unclear or relationships become intense. Child and family sector professionals can help families and carers to identify and mitigate these risks.

Use this quick reference guide in discussions with families and carers of children aged 13 to 18 about:

- participating safely in online communities
- spotting warning signs that a person online may be unsafe
- setting boundaries with others online
- recognising one-sided relationships online.

Participating safely in online communities

Online communities built around special interests can provide joy, identity, and a powerful sense of belonging.

These sorts of spaces matter because they can:

- reduce feelings of isolation
- provide social connection without face-to-face pressure
- provide social connection based on shared language and passions
- build identity and self-esteem
- create opportunities for creativity and learning.

For many teenagers and younger children, including those who are neurodivergent, these spaces can feel safer and more predictable, accepting and comfortable than in-person social settings.

You can help families and carers support children to participate safely in online communities. While parents and carers don’t need to know every detail of their child’s online activity, they can provide a safe, supportive presence by:

- showing interest in their child’s special interests
- asking about communities without judgement
- helping set privacy and messaging controls for children and teenagers.

If families and carers are unsure how to start these conversations, you can suggest they say things to their child like:

- ‘Show me what you like about this group.’
- ‘Who are the moderators?’
- ‘What happens if someone breaks the rules?’
- ‘Do you have any new online friends? Want help checking if they’re safe?’

Spotting warning signs

Online communities, including ones on gaming and messaging platforms, can sometimes be used by unsafe people to trick teenagers and younger children into trusting them. Children often assume honesty and good intent from others and take them at their word.

You can help families start conversations with their children about the warning signs and behaviours that might show a person is unsafe. Some children, including those who are neurodivergent, may not automatically perceive these behaviours as 'unsafe' – they might just feel excited, confused, anxious or overstimulated.

Families can use the handout on unsafe and safe people to discuss with their children the sorts of behaviours that may show a person is unsafe. (You can provide families with the link to the handout or print out a copy.) esafety.gov.au/communities/child-safe-communities/families#talking-about-online-child-sexual-abuse

Setting boundaries with others online

It's important for teenagers and younger children to maintain healthy boundaries online. Families and carers can remind them that it's generally safe to talk about what they like, but not details about their life, their body, or where they are (their location).

Having shared interests doesn't mean someone is safe or who they say they are.

You can encourage families and carers to remind children that it's OK to leave a conversation that feels unsure, uncomfortable or unsafe – even without a reason.

Here are some 'exit' scripts they can share with children.

- 'I'm not comfortable with this. I'm leaving this chat.'
- 'I don't want to talk about that. Bye.'
- 'This chat isn't safe for me. Bye.'
- 'I have to go now.'

Encourage families to explore information about recognising power imbalance and when a relationship becomes unhealthy – (esafety.gov.au/young-people).

Recognising one-sided online relationships

One-sided relationships (sometimes called 'parasocial' relationships) are where a person feels connected to or deeply emotionally bonded with someone who doesn't know them, or with an AI companion or chatbot. This includes feelings people can have toward:

- YouTubers
- streamers
- influencers
- celebrities
- online creators
- fictional characters.

Children might feel:

- 'They get me.'
- 'They're like a friend.'
- 'I know them well.'



Families can help teenagers and younger children understand that feeling 'connected' to an online personality or AI companion or chatbot doesn't mean they know you. It is also important to remind children regularly that not all online personalities, AI companions or chatbots care about what's healthy, so they might encourage oversharing, spending money or following dangerous advice.

Getting help and reporting

Families can show their child how to report anything that makes them feel scared or uncomfortable. Encourage them to let teenagers and younger children know that help seeking is about keeping them safe and supported. Police, eSafety and support services are focused on protecting children and preventing further harm.

If there is immediate danger, **call triple zero (000)**.

Where appropriate reports of online child sexual abuse material, sexual grooming can be made to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) via the Report Abuse function at accce.gov.au/report. All reports are reviewed and assessed by the Australian Federal Police. This includes AI modified or generated images and videos.

eSafety can investigate cyberbullying of children, image-based abuse (sharing, or threatening to share, intimate images without the consent of the person shown) and illegal and restricted content. You can find more information about reporting at esafety.gov.au/report.

Children may need expert help if they're suffering from the impacts of serious online abuse or exposure to disturbing content. You can find a list of support services at esafety.gov.au/report/counselling-support.

