



Quick reference guide

Help families unpack the difference between surprises and secrets

We want children to feel confident telling a safe, trusted adult when something doesn't feel right, especially when they are online. One way to support children to do this is to help them build the skills to tell the difference between surprises and secrets – and to get help when someone asks them to keep a secret that makes them feel unsure, uncomfortable or unsafe.

You can use this quick reference guide during discussions about online safety with families and carers of children aged 0 to 12. You can use it to:

- unpack the difference between surprises and secrets in language children can understand
- recognise warning signs children can look out for
- provide simple rules for families and carers to practice with children.

The difference between surprises and secrets

A **surprise** is something that:



is meant to be fun



does **not** make you feel uncomfortable or worried



is for a short time and will be told later



is planned by someone you trust

A **secret** is something that:



you are told never to tell anyone else



may be about bodies or sending pictures



makes you feel unsure, uncomfortable or unsafe



Help families and carers understand that children respond best to clear descriptions rather than vague phrases. Instead of saying things like ‘trust your gut if something feels off’, families can use concrete examples like these.

- ‘A surprise makes people happy and is told later.’
- ‘A secret might make your tummy feel tight or your heart beat fast.’
- ‘A secret might make you feel confused or scared.’

Using this sort of language helps children recognise warning signs in their own bodies. Children might feel one or a few of these warning signs – or something different altogether. They might feel excited at first or confused about what is happening.

It is important that families and carers encourage children to tell a safe and trusted adult straight away if someone asks them to keep a secret. Talking about ‘secrets’ regularly – and calmly – helps children feel safe to come to a trusted adult when they need help.

Support families to use these online safety steps

Children may find it difficult to make safe decisions under pressure, especially if it's coming from an adult, so they can benefit from simple, consistent rules that are easy to remember.

You can provide families and carers with these clear steps of what to do if someone asks a child to keep a secret online that worries, frightens or confuses them, or if someone asks their child personal questions.

Children should stop the activity.

Tell a safe and trusted adult what has happened.

Get support to report it if appropriate.

Encourage families and carers to remind children of these steps often and practice them together.

Children may worry they will get into trouble if something strange or bad happens online. Families and carers can reassure children regularly that they won't be in trouble, and they can always come to them or another trusted adult for help.

Getting help and reporting

Families and carers can show children how to report anything that makes them feel scared or uncomfortable in an app or game. Encourage them to look at the reporting tools in the child's favourite apps or games. Practicing how to find and use these tools can help children feel confident and safe when online.

Let 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 www.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 (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.

Kids Helpline is a free and confidential 24-hour hotline and phone counselling service for people aged between 5 to 25 www.kidshelpline.com.au | 1800 55 1800

Headspace is a mental health and wellbeing free support service that helps people between the ages 12 to 25 www.headspace.org.au | 1800 650 890

You can find a list of other support services at esafety.gov.au/report/counselling-support