Parents and carers

Connection, belonging and vulnerability online

Offline experiences and online vulnerability

Online vulnerability does not usually begin online. It is often influenced by what is happening offline. This might include:

- feeling lonely, excluded or disconnected from peers
- changes in family circumstances, friendships or school environments
- significant life transitions or stressful experiences
- feeling misunderstood or struggling to find a sense of belonging
- wanting acceptance, support or validation from others.

These experiences do not cause online harm on their own. However, they can influence what a young person is looking for online and increase their vulnerability to certain people.

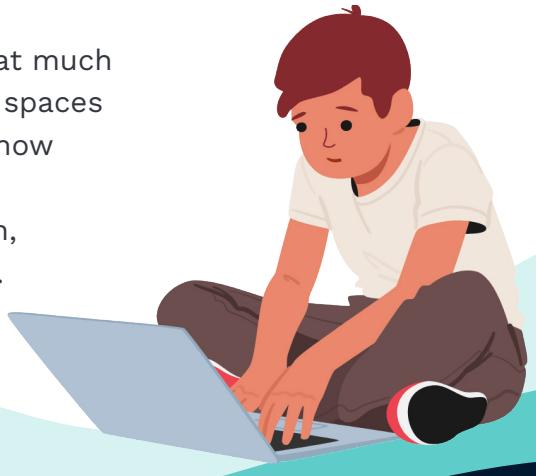
How young people engage online

eSafety's research found almost all children and young people are using connected devices and spending time online. This means the more time they spend online, the more exposure they have to a wide range of people, content, ideas and influences.

Of those surveyed, more than half reported engaging in behaviours that may increase their exposure to online harm. Some of the behaviours included:

- **having a public account, hidden profile or an account** they didn't want their parent or caregiver to know about
- **communicating with unknown individuals**, including unknown adults. (Some 16 to 17-year-olds did this through dating apps.)
- **sharing their real-time location** with someone who wasn't a member of their family.

The challenge for parents and carers and other adults, is that much of this happens out of sight. Unlike the offline world, online spaces can be far less visible. This means, adults may not always know who children and young people are talking to, what content they're consuming, which communities they're engaging with, or what messages and influences they are being exposed to.



Connection, belonging and vulnerability online

Some online environments, communities and individuals can exploit young people's needs by offering connection, validation or belonging in ways that may not be safe.

Online sexual exploitation or victimisation

Online sexual exploitation or victimisation occurs when someone builds trust with a child or young person to manipulate, abuse or exploit them. This may involve pressuring a child to share sexual content, creating or sharing intimate images without consent, or threatening to share images to maintain control.

These situations are often difficult to recognise because they usually do not start with obvious warning signs. What may appear to be friendship, attention or support can be part of a process designed to build trust and increase influence over a young person.

Common signs of online sexual exploitation or victimisation may include:

- **Friendship, emotional support and attention**: Someone frequently contacts a young person, gives compliments, offers validation, or presents themselves as someone who truly understands them. They might say things like 'You're really easy to talk to,' or 'I feel like you actually get me.'
- **Encouraging secrecy**: They may try to create distance between the young person and trusted adults by asking them to keep conversations private. Examples include, 'This is just between us,' or 'Your parents wouldn't understand.'
- **Offering gifts, rewards or opportunities**: They may offer gaming credits, Uber Eats vouchers, access to exclusive online groups or communities, help gaining followers, or special opportunities in exchange for attention, trust or ongoing contact. Examples include: 'I can get you into our VIP Discord group,' or 'I can help you get more followers.'
- **Increasingly personal or sexual conversations**: As trust develops, conversations may become more personal, intimate or sexual in nature. They might ask questions such as: 'Do you have a crush on anyone?' or 'Can I see what you look like?' before progressing to requests for photos, videos or other personal information.

Harmful content

Children and young people often go online looking for advice, inspiration, connection, acceptance or a sense of community. However, in that search, they may also encounter content, communities and influences that are harmful.

Examples of harmful content include:

- **Harmful attitudes, ideas and beliefs**, such as content that promotes rigid gender stereotypes, encourages hostility towards groups, or presents discrimination and prejudice as normal or acceptable.
- **Harmful online communities** that normalise or glorify behaviours such as self-harm, disordered eating, hate speech or extremist beliefs, while creating a sense of belonging that can make these messages difficult to challenge.

- **Sexualised or pornographic content** that may create unrealistic expectations about relationships, consent, body image and sexual behaviour.
- **Conflict content, misinformation and divisive messages**, including graphic footage, misleading information and content designed to provoke strong emotional reactions or reinforce certain viewpoints.

It is not only the content itself that matters. Repeated exposure to certain messages, attitudes and communities can influence how young people think, feel and behave over time.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

AI can create content, generate images and videos, answer questions, and personalise communication. While it offers many benefits, it can also make online harms harder to identify and influence how people access information, support, and connection.

AI assistants/chatbots and AI companions

- AI assistants such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Copilot are increasingly used to find information, solve problems, generate content, and seek advice. Unlike traditional search engines, they can have conversations that feel personalised and engaging.
- A growing category of AI, known as AI companions, is designed specifically for conversation, connection, and relationships. Often marketed as sources of friendship or emotional support, these apps learn from user interactions and adapt to a person's preferences and emotional state. Some examples include Linky, Talkie and C.Ai.
- AI assistants and companions are available 24/7, offering immediate responses and a private space to explore sensitive topics. For some people, they can provide low-pressure social interaction and a sense of acceptance.

However, AI often reinforces a user's perspective, which may not always be helpful. Some people may develop unrealistic expectations of relationships or become more vulnerable to manipulation online. If an AI relationship ends suddenly, it can also cause significant distress or feelings of loss.

Read more about AI companions.

Supporting children and young people who use AI assistants/chatbots and companions

- The first step is to respond with curiosity, not judgement.
- Acknowledge that the AI assistant or companion may be meeting a genuine need, then explore what it is being used for. You might say: 'It sounds like this AI assistant/companion has become an important source of support. I'd love to hear a bit more about how you're using it.'
- Once you understand the role it is playing, you can explore both the benefits and potential risks together.
- Talk about the importance of questioning advice, checking important information with trusted adults or reliable sources, and recognising that AI responses are not always accurate.

Talking to young people and children about online relationships and influences

Sometimes, online relationships, friendships or communities do not feel harmful at first. They can feel real, supportive, important and even protective.

If your child talks about an online friend, influencer, group or community, create opportunities to learn more about what they value in that relationship or space. You might ask or say:

- 'Tell me more about that.'
- 'What do you like about that community?'
- 'What do you enjoy about spending time there?'
- 'What makes that person important to you?'

These conversations can help you better understand the connections and influences in your child's life while encouraging reflection on trust, relationships and belonging. They are often most effective during everyday moments and regular conversations, rather than only when something has gone wrong online.

Responding to 'bids' for connection

Dr. John Gottman explains a 'bid' is simply an attempt to get attention, acceptance, or connection[1].

One of the most protective things we can do is build and maintain meaningful connections with young people, and those connections often grow through small moments of attention.

- Sometimes that's listening without judgement rather than rushing to offer our own opinions or solutions.
- Sometimes it's showing interest and actively participating in their world. For example, if they enjoy gaming, it might mean joining them. In fact, eSafety's **gaming research** found that many teens wanted their parents to game with them.
- And lastly, making time when they reach out, even if the moment isn't convenient: 'I really want to hear about this. I just need 10 minutes to finish what I'm doing so I can give you my full attention.'

[1] **Gottman Parenting - The Gottman Institute**

Recognising and responding to online harm

Even with strong communication, connection and prevention strategies in place, things can still go wrong online. Recognising early warning signs, encouraging critical thinking, and knowing how to access support can help young people navigate online challenges more safely.

Recognising changes and opportunities for conversation

Focus on behaviours rather than specific apps, platforms or technologies. Changes in behaviour can create opportunities for supportive conversations and early intervention. Some signs to look for include:

- becoming increasingly protective of devices or hiding online conversations
- increased reliance on a particular person, group, community, chatbot or app for support, advice or validation
- a sense of urgency, obligation or pressure in online interactions
- changes in mood, routines, friendships, interests, beliefs or language
- withdrawing from family, friends or activities they previously enjoyed
- increased secrecy about online activities or relationships.

These signs do not necessarily indicate harm, but they can provide an opportunity to check in, ask questions and offer support.

Building digital literacy with your child

Encourage your child to question the advice, information, content and relationships they encounter online. Helpful questions might include:

- Who created this content and why?
- Is this information reliable?
- Does this person respect my boundaries?
- Does this relationship encourage me to think for myself?
- How does this content or community make me feel?

As children get older, they become less likely to seek help from their parents or carers first. For this reason, it is important to ensure they know where they can go for support if something goes wrong online. Talk with them about:

- who they can speak to when they need help
- platform reporting tools and safety features (**The eSafety guide** can provide information on available safeguards and how to report directly to the platform, app or service)
- external support services available to them.

Responding to online harm

eSafety Commissioner

eSafety's reporting schemes act as a **safety net** when a platform has failed to remove harmful content or to respond appropriately.

Report online harm

What you can report to eSafety

Report forms

How to collect evidence

Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE)

The ACCCE is an arm of the Australian Federal Police responsible for taking reports of Online Child Sexual Exploitation.

Report abuse | ACCCE

Counselling and support services

eSafety's Counselling and support services provides contact details for a range of specialist services that can offer information, support and assistance.

Additional reading and resources

Parents | eSafety Commissioner

Young People | eSafety Commissioner

Adolescent encounters with online pornography | eSafety Commissioner

Advisories and blogposts | eSafety Commissioner

Gore videos and more: How violent content is reaching children and what you can do | eSafety Commissioner