

A parent's guide to: Navigating secondary school

*Online safety tips to
support children*

internet
matters.org



Secondary school brings new freedoms, friendships and challenges, both offline and online. With shifting trends, new platforms and increasing independence, there are both benefits and risks.

This is also often a time when parental guidance drops while risky situations rise. Staying involved is essential.

What are teens doing online?

Common online activities for teens include:

- **Checking in with friends on social media** (e.g. Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram)
- **Gaming with friends**
- **Streaming TV, music and videos**
- **Creating and sharing** content
- Joining **online forums** and causes
- **Doing homework via video chat** or shared documents
- **Using AI tools** to support learning



What risks and challenges do they face?

**Greater independence
means more opportunities
and more risks.**

Teens may explore new platforms, connect with strangers or face peer pressure.

- ▶ [Cyberbullying & online respect](#)
- ▶ [Sexting & image-based abuse](#)
- ▶ [Misogyny, online hate & harmful content](#)
- ▶ [Peer pressure & digital identity](#)
- ▶ [Managing screen time](#)
- ▶ [Using AI for schoolwork](#)

You can also explore a range of [useful resources](#)

Cyberbullying & online respect

As friendships change, disagreements can extend onto social media and group chats.

Sometimes, bullying and hurt can take place solely online while still impacting victims offline. It might include:

- Mean comments in group chats
- Spreading rumours online
- Excluding someone from digital spaces or chats
- Harassment over gaming platforms (sometimes misogynistic in nature)



What can you do to help?

- Talk about the difference between **banter and bullying**
- **Stay calm if it happens** and work together on next steps
- **Know how to block and report** on key apps and make sure your teen knows too
- **Keep evidence of bullying messages** if you need school support
- If your teen witnesses bullying, **discuss how they can support the person being targeted** – for example, not joining in, reporting the content and offering private encouragement
- **Encourage them to model respect online**, think before posting, avoid hurtful jokes and treat others as they would face-to-face



Support from schools

All schools should have a policy that guides their response to online incidents. They may have mentors or 'anti-bullying programmes' to raise awareness.

More resources



[Cyberbullying conversation guide](#) ▶



[Cyberbullying advice hub](#) ▶



[The Online Together Project](#) ▶

Sexting & image-based abuse

Teens may share sexual images or messages as a form of flirting or because they feel it's expected in a relationship.

They might also do so to fit in, feel validated or because someone is pressuring them to do so. While some teens see it as harmless, the risks are real and it's classed as child sexual abuse material (CSAM) when under 18.

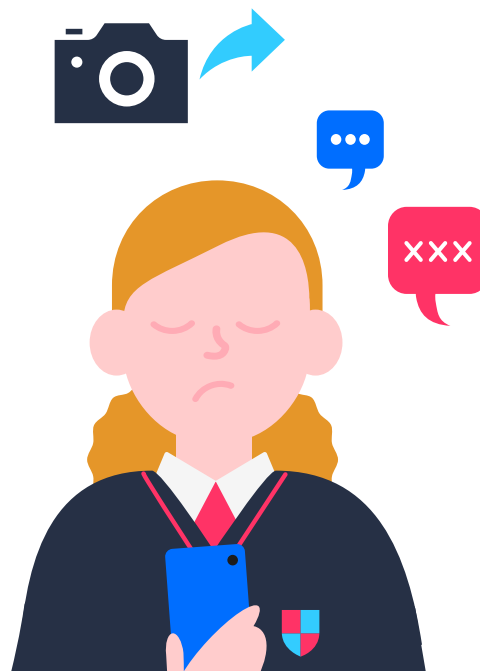
Risks of sexual image-sharing include:

- Losing control over images where it gets shared further
- Emotional distress or shame
- Potential blackmail ([sextortion](#), which increasingly targets boys)
- Legal consequences if under-18s are involved

Support from schools



RSHE and similar lessons around the UK cover consent, respect and the risks of sharing sexual images. Schools should have clear policies for handling incidents and will know when to involve safeguarding teams or the police. Ask how they address this so you can reinforce the same messages at home.

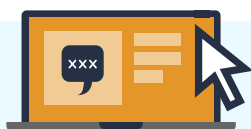


What can you do to help?

- **Talk about healthy relationships, respect and consent.** Revisit the topic regularly
- Discuss the pressures they might feel to send or ask for sexual images. **Use 'what if' scenarios to help them think** through how they could handle these pressures
- **Check privacy settings together**, but stress they don't guarantee control
- If an image is shared or they're threatened for money or more images:
 - Use [Report Remove](#) to request deletion from the internet
 - Report exploitation or threats to [CEOP](#)
 - Reassure them they can come to you without fear of blame



More resources



[Sexting advice hub](#) ▶



[Sexual image-sharing among kids](#) ▶



[What is sextortion?](#) ▶

Misogyny, online hate & harmful content

Repeated exposure to misogyny, online hate and other harmful content can shape beliefs, normalise disrespect and reinforce harmful stereotypes.

This can lead to a distorted view of relationships, emotional distress and in some cases, even radicalisation. Over time, this constant exposure can also desensitise them to the impact of hateful words and actions.



What is misogyny?



Misogyny is dislike or prejudice against women and girls. Online, it can appear in:

- Influencer videos promoting sexist views
- Memes that mock or belittle girls/women
- Gaming chats with abusive language
- Extremist groups targeting young people

Support from schools

Many schools address respect, equality and online hate through PSHE, RSHE or digital literacy lessons. They may also run anti-bullying or diversity programmes to promote inclusion. Ask how they cover these topics so you can continue the conversation at home.

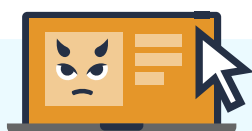


What can you do to help?

- **Talk about how online content influences attitudes**, listen to what they know and ask open-ended questions to get them thinking
- **Encourage empathy and critical thinking**
- **Share diverse, positive role models** to challenge harmful views
- **Help teens report harmful content** and block toxic accounts
- **Use [The Online Together Project interactive tool](#)** to support conversations about gender stereotypes and online hate



More resources



[Online hate advice hub](#) ▶



[Misogyny advice guides](#) ▶

Peer pressure & digital identity

At secondary school, teens might feel greater pressure to fit in

Online, this can lead them to posting content for likes and approval, or to project an idealised image of their life. It can mean:

- Taking part in risky trends and challenges
- Sharing overly-personal content to gain approval from others
- Chasing likes and followers, possibly by leaving their accounts public or interacting with potentially harmful people
- Watching content or following people who show idealised lifestyles that make your child feel left behind



What can you do to help?

- **Use the news or things you see on social media to discuss the topic**, such as a post that shows a specific lifestyle
- **Encourage them** to choose friends and follow people who share positive, realistic values
- Talk about how online actions, including likes, shares and comments, **form their digital footprint and online reputation**
- **Remind your teen** that their digital identity can influence future opportunities, from friendships to job applications



Support from schools

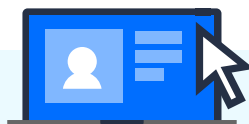
Many schools promote an inclusive school culture and take the time to celebrate diversity to help form positive social norms. Schools will also be keen to work in partnership with parents to resolve any online related issues. RSHE, PSHE and other similar lessons are likely to address peer pressure and wellbeing as well.



More resources



Helping young people manage their online identity ►



Online reputation guide ►

Screen time & wellbeing

As teens head back to school, screen habits can make a big difference to their focus, learning and overall wellbeing.

Used well, tech supports creativity, learning and friendships. However, used without balance, it can affect sleep, concentration and mood. Poor balance includes:

- Staying up late on devices, leading to poor sleep
- Multiscreening during homework, affecting focus
- Using devices to avoid tasks or responsibilities
- Missing out on offline activities or exercise



Support from schools

Many schools promote healthy tech use by setting clear rules for device use in class and during study time. Digital literacy lessons or wellbeing programmes may also cover managing screen time, avoiding distractions and balancing online and offline activities. Ask your child's school how they approach these topics so you can reinforce the same routines at home.



What can you do to help?

- Together, **agree on a termtime plan for homework, social media and bedtimes.** Involving your teen in the decision-making process can help get them on board
- **Create screen-free zones** (e.g. mealtimes, bedrooms)
- **Encourage them** to avoid multiscreening – suggest one task, one device
- **Remind them** to take short breaks during homework sessions
- Use **built-in screen time tools** to set limits and focus
- **Set a good example** with your own tech use
- **Encourage offline hobbies** and suggest alternatives if they need it



More resources



Screen time advice hub ▶

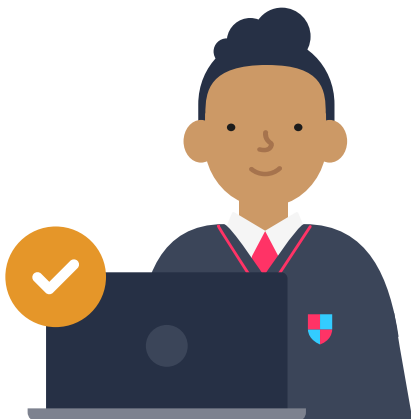


Screen time tools ▶

AI and schoolwork

AI tools like ChatGPT and Snapchat's My AI are being widely used by teens for schoolwork, such as brainstorming, revising or explaining ideas.

In fact, nearly half of children aged 15–17 who use AI do so to support their studies. Yet, AI can also provide incorrect, biased or misleading information or encourage overreliance, blurring the boundaries between tool and advice.



What can you do to help?



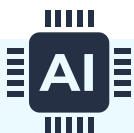
- **Set a fact-check rule** (e.g. verify AI-generated answers by finding two other trusted sources)
- **Encourage AI tools to support learning** rather than replace independent thinking
- **Talk about plagiarism** and how copying from AI can affect learning and originality
- Make it clear **not to share personal or sensitive details** with AI chatbots
- **Explore AI tools with your teen** to support understanding and spot errors or bias together



Support from schools

Many schools are starting to guide pupils on safe and ethical AI use, often as part of computing, digital literacy or PSHE lessons. They may have policies on plagiarism, acceptable tools and how AI fits into homework or coursework. Ask your child's teachers how they approach AI in class so you can reinforce the same messages at home.

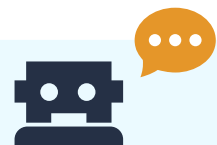
More resources



[AI safety & support](#) ▶



[A parent's guide to AI tools](#) ▶



[What are AI chatbots?](#) ▶

Where to get help and useful resources

Search on internetmatters.org to explore these top resources:



[Teen online safety guide](#)



[Parental controls guides](#)



[Apps and platforms guides](#)



[The Online Together Project tool](#)



[Check-in templates](#)



[Report online harm](#)

Get personalised advice straight to your inbox

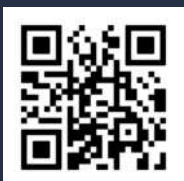
Want support to stay on top of your kids' digital lives? Together, we've got this, with our free personalised family digital toolkit. By completing the form you'll get:

- Age-specific checklists and guides
- Safety information on the latest apps and platforms
- Resources to tackle online concerns by age
- Interactive tools to encourage discussions on key topics

Scan the QR code or go to internetmatters.org/toolkit



Scan below or visit internetmatters.org for more advice



 [InternetMatters](https://www.facebook.com/InternetMatters)

 [@im_org](https://twitter.com/im_org)

 [@InternetMatters](https://www.youtube.com/InternetMatters)

 [Internet Matters Ltd](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Internet-Matters-Ltd)

 [@internetmattersorg](https://www.instagram.com/internetmattersorg)

**internet
matters.org**