

Navigating secondary school

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Tips for addressing online risks and harms



Online risks & challenges at secondary

Greater independence at secondary school means more opportunities and risks online. At this stage, children might be exploring new platforms, getting more connected devices and figuring out their interests.

Explore the different types of online harms they risk experiencing to see how you can keep them safe.

Scan to
see the
full guide



Cyberbullying and respect

As friendships change, disagreements can extend onto social platforms, online games 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 (such as on WhatsApp or other messaging apps).
- Spreading rumours within social spaces online, possibly using AI to create hurtful images or content.
- Excluding someone from digital spaces or chats that everyone else is a part of.
- Harassment or abusive comments towards others that are based in hate such as misogyny, racism and homophobia.



Tips to keep them safe

- Talk about the difference between banter (something you can only do with good friends) and bullying.
- Explore their apps with them to find out how they can report, block or otherwise deal with mean people.
- If your child is bullied, stay calm, keep evidence (screenshots) and let the school know.
- Together, brainstorm different ways they can support someone else who is being bullied such as reporting, telling a teacher/parent and sending a supportive message.
- Encourage them to lead with respect online by thinking before sharing and avoiding language that targets others.

Sending and asking for nude images

Teens might 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.

Risks of nude image-sharing include:

- Losing control over a sent image when it gets shared more widely.
- Feeling distressed, ashamed or embarrassed, which can prevent them from seeking help.
- Sexual coercion ('sextortion') where someone threatens to share nudes unless money is paid (or more nude images are sent).
- Legal action as teens sharing nude images of themselves is illegal.

Tips to keep them safe

- Talk about healthy relationships, respect and content - no one should ask for or say anything that makes your child feel uncomfortable.
- Discuss the pressures they might face to send or ask for nude images (such as older students encouraging them).
- Check in-app and device privacy settings to help them manage who can message them.
- If they share a nude image or are threatened, use Childline's Report Remove tool, report the incident to CEOP and assure your child that you will support them.



Misogyny, online hate & harmful content

Repeatedly seeing misogyny, online hate and other harmful content can shape teens' 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.

Tips to keep them safe

- Talk about how online content can influence attitudes; listen to what they know and ask open-ended questions to encourage critical thinking.
- Share a range of different types of role models from various backgrounds to help challenge harmful views.
- If their online feeds are overwhelmed by biased or hateful content, work with them to reset their algorithm in the platform settings.
- Search 'gender stereotypes' on InternetMatters.org for a quiz that can help you start important conversations.



Peer pressure and 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.
- Bypassing age restrictions and accessing apps they shouldn't because others are.
- Watching content which shows idealised lifestyles that cause feelings of missing out.

Tips to keep them safe

- Use the news or things you hear about to talk with your child about the topic, such as a social media post which shows a specific lifestyle.
- Empower them to choose friends who share positive, realistic values and stop friendships with those who don't.
- Talk about how the actions they take online creates a digital footprint of who they are, which can influence future opportunities in work and education.



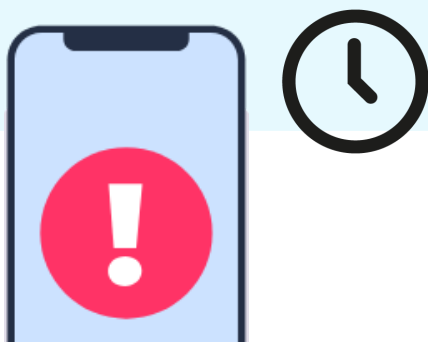
Screen time & wellbeing

Screen habits can make a big difference to teens' 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..
- Using multiple devices at once, or using devices while doing homework which negatively impacts focus.
- Using devices to avoid tasks or responsibilities..
- Missing out on offline opportunities like exercise or meeting up with friends..

Tips to keep them safe

- Together, agree on a term-time plan for homework, downtime and bedtime to help create more balance.
- Create screen-free zones that everyone follows (such as no phones in bedrooms).
- Try to encourage one device at a time instead of, for example, having the TV on while playing a mobile game.
- Use built-in screen time tools on networks, devices and apps to reinforce limits and balance.
- Lead by example by showing your own balanced device use.
- Encourage a range of offline activities and hobbies to help them take screen time breaks..



Using artificial intelligence

AI can be a great tool to help your child level up their ideas, revise subject areas and think more deeply about projects. However, some children and young people use AI tools to do the work for them.

This means that they aren't developing key skills that will support them in future exams, education and careers.

Additionally, many people now use AI as if it's a search engine, taking its answers at face value. If your child does this, they are at risk of spreading misinformation.

Finally, some children are beginning to rely on chatbots for conversation and 'human' connection, which can impact their real relationships.

Tips to keep them safe

- Review your child's schoolwork to ensure it's in their own words; help them if they're struggling.
- Set up a fact-check rule to ensure they are not spreading misinformation (such as finding a non-AI source).
- Work together to show them different positive ways they can use AI tools to support learning rather than replace it.
- Set ground rules around using AI such as what is and is not allowed along with boundaries around sharing information and images or videos with AI.
- Explore new tools together to further your understanding and show your teen appropriate use.



Helpful resources & activities

Use these activities and resources to help your teen develop their media literacy skills which will support them into adulthood.



Teens age guide: Learn about the online life of teens and get tips for apps, online safety and more.



Step-by-step parental controls: See how to set restrictions across networks, devices, apps and platforms your teen uses.



Apps and platforms guides: Explore popular platforms or find a new app to help your teen manage their wellbeing or gain new skills.



Additional needs hub: If your teen has SEND or additional needs, use this hub for strategies to make their time online safer.



Find the Fake: Complete any of these 4 quizzes with your teen to help them think more critically about things they see online.



The Online Together Project: Complete these quizzes about stereotypes and hate to help your teen keep their online experiences positive.



Check-in templates: Use these templates to check-in with your teen about their online life.