

Moving to secondary school

Tips for navigating online risk and harm

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Online risks & challenges in early secondary school

Children's online life isn't separate from their offline one. Helping them build healthy habits now will shape how they navigate digital life throughout secondary school. Explore potential harms below for tips on how to keep your child safe online.

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Screen time & building new digital habits

As school routines shift, screens can become central to how children learn, relax and stay connected. Used well, tech supports creativity, friendships and independent learning.

But without boundaries, screen time can quickly affect focus, mood and sleep, especially when children are tired, overwhelmed or simply adjusting to the new pace of secondary school. Watch out for:

- Late-night scrolling in bedrooms.
- Multiscreening and distractions during homework.
- Using screens to avoid responsibilities or difficult tasks..

Tips to keep them safe

- Create a digital family agreement to help set screen time boundaries.
- Keep devices out of bedrooms at night. You can have a central charging location in a common area.
- Encourage using one screen at time to help them focus on one task at a time.
- Use screen time tools together to set healthy limits and show your own use of them.
- Suggest ways to unwind after school that don't include screens..



Peer pressure & digital identity

As children start secondary school, friendships shift and the pressure to fit in grows. Online, this can lead them to copying influencers, joining trends or presenting a version of themselves that isn't quite real.

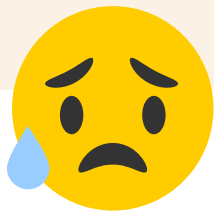
Many begin seeking approval, which can shape how they see themselves and others. This might look like:

- Videoing themselves doing trends or challenges that could put them at risk in hopes of gaining attention.
- Getting upset if they can't use their device because they're worried they'll miss out.

- Accessing apps with older age minimums to fit in with others who might be breaking the rules because they don't want to be left out.

Tips to keep them safe

- Talk about the pressures they might feel and how to manage those feelings in positive ways.
- Encourage them to keep talking about how they feel either with you or trained counsellors on sites like Childline.
- Encourage them to practise mindfulness about how content and activities online are making them feel to help them recognise when it's time for a break.



Cyberbullying and respect

As children build new friendships, misunderstandings and fallouts at school can easily continue online, especially through group chats, online games and social spaces.

What starts as banter can quickly become bullying, and children may struggle to recognise when it's gone too far.

Tips to keep them safe

- Talk about the line between a joke and bullying, explaining that different people might understand our words in different ways.

- Encourage them to speak up if they see someone being targeted or if they are a target themselves.
- On the platforms they use, show them how to block, report and use other tools when they see or experience bullying.
- Keep evidence like screenshots to share with your child's school and, in extreme cases, the police.

Misogyny, harmful content and stereotypes

As children explore more spaces online, they might come across jokes, extreme influencers or stereotypes that are sexist, racist or homophobic, sometimes without realising the harm.

Algorithms can also amplify this kind of content, especially if it's liked or shared by their peers. Signs for risk of harm could include:

- Following accounts or content creators which promote extreme views related to sex, race, religion or other characteristics.
- Liking or sharing content which mocks different groups or individuals.
- Repeating stereotypes about gender, race or other characteristics.



Tips to keep them safe

- Talk about respect and how online content can easily shape attitudes.
- Call out any language which is sexist, racist, homophobic or otherwise hateful, even if it's unintentional (e.g. 'he plays like a girl' or 'that's gay').
- Ask about the content they see online. Have they ever seen examples of hate?
- Together, decide on actions they can take to stop hateful content from spreading online such as reporting that content.
- Share with them a range of diverse role models that can challenge stereotypes.

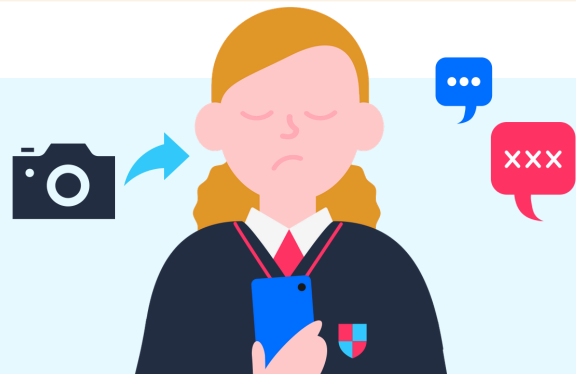
Sending or requesting nude images

While it might feel too early to talk about sexting, the pressure to share nude images can begin as children start secondary school. If older pupils are involved or group chats turn inappropriate, this might happen sooner than you expect.

Children may not fully understand the risks or may think it's harmless and expected in relationships.

Tips to keep them safe

- Talk early about consent, respect and healthy boundaries.
- Use real-life stories or news headlines to start conversations and understand your child's view on the issue.



- Be their safe space and encourage them to talk to you if they send or receive a nude image. Avoid getting angry or giving them big reactions and instead lead with calm to show them you can be their support.
- Acknowledge the different pressures they might face from older students or from people they form relationships with and explain that people who care for them won't pressure them.
- If they share an image, use Childline's Report Remove tool and report any exploitation or threats to CEOP.

In-game spending and online finance

Many popular games encourage spending on skins, upgrades or loot boxes. For children new to managing money, it's easy to overspend without realising it. Pressure to keep up with friends can also make some purchases feel 'essential'. Look out for:

- Going through pocket money or gift cards too quickly.
- Repeated or desperate requests for spending money within games to avoid feeling left out.
- Frustration or upset that is blown out of proportion when spending limits are set.



Tips to keep them safe

- Discuss with your child about where they want to spend money and why to help you understand how much in-game purchases cost.
- Agree on limits through negotiation and set those limits using parental controls in their games or on their consoles.
- Compare the cost of virtual items to the cost of real items they might want to help them understand how far their money could stretch.
- Consider adding gift cards to their account rather than your credit card to reduce unplanned spending.
- Set clear expectations around asking permission before adding any payment methods. Some parental controls will also require parent permission before purchase.

Spotting mis- and disinformation

As children start searching for homework help or exploring trends, they might come across content that isn't always accurate or safe.

At this age, they may struggle to spot fake facts or biased sources, especially if peers are sharing them too. Watch out for them:

- Repeating conspiracy theories or viral false information.
- Sharing false information as fact.
- Feeling confused or worried by stories they've heard online.
- Using AI as a search engine and source for true information.

Tips to keep them safe

- Create a fact-checking rule that says they must check information against 2 more trusted sources.
- Discuss what makes a source trusted.
- Encourage them to ask you for help if they're ever unsure if something is true.
- If they're searching for information online, have them use a standard search engine rather than AI so that they can look at the sources.
- Remind them that AI can get things wrong and so can content creators and celebrities.



Using artificial intelligence

AI tools are now built into many everyday apps from search engines to schoolwork software. Children might use ChatGPT, Google's AI search or Microsoft Copilot in Word or PowerPoint to help with tasks. These tools can be helpful for brainstorming but they can also provide biased, incomplete or incorrect information.

Tips to keep them safe

- Talk about how AI tools may not always be accurate so can't be relied on.
 - Use AI tools together to demonstrate appropriate use.
 - If your child has not reached an AI tool's age minimum, make sure you only use them together.
- Encourage your child to see AI as a tool to help improve their skills rather than doing thinking for them.
 - Before using or believing information provided by AI, get them to find sources via a search engine to fact-check.
 - Highlight the need to keep private information about themselves, their friends or their family away from the AI chatbot.



Helpful resources & activities

Use these activities and resources to help your child develop their media literacy to support them as they grow and explore new online spaces.



11-13s age guide: Learn about the online life of children aged 11-13 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 child uses.



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



Additional needs hub: If your child 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 child 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 child keep their online experiences positive.



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