

2KNOW

knowledge to prevent



GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

NOT JUST A DEVICE

EMPOWERING YOUR CHILD'S ONLINE SAFETY

**A Guide for Parents on Digital Safety Skills
with Insights from Children & Youth**



Protect Children
Suojellaan Lapsia



**Children
at Risk**



UNIVERSITY OF
EASTERN FINLAND



Funded by
the European Union

INTRODUCTION

Digital safety skills can be compared to other safety skills such as teaching children traffic skills. No child ventures into traffic without first practising, for example, walking the school route together with an adult. Just like in any other social environment, the younger the child, the more they need an adult's presence to stay safe. Older children and teenagers also still need parents' support in certain situations.

The digital device acts as a gateway to a digital environment where children navigate and interact with other internet users. They are too often exposed to such social environment unsupervised. The key factor is not the amount of time spent online, but rather the experiences children have there, the activities and content they engage in, and the people they interact with.



"Adults should make sure that nothing bad happens to us online"
A child, 9-11 years old



The quotes in this guide have been collected from questionnaires in which teachers and youth workers reflect on their discussions with groups of children and young people. We have obtained permission from the respondents to include these in our material.

PARENT'S ROLE IN THEIR CHILD'S DIGITAL LIFE

Children and young people are very skilled at using digital devices - often even better than adults! However, their socio-cognitive skills are only just developing, so the presence, guidance, and support from adults in emotionally and socially challenging situations online are essential for the child's wellbeing and safety.

It might be helpful for parents to consider why they choose to go to a climbing park with their child, even if the child is a more skilled climber than them. It could be that the parent simply wants to spend quality time with their child, or they may have concerns about the child's safety and the possibility of them getting hurt or upset and needing parental support. Parents might also worry about other individuals being in the climbing park and potentially causing harm to their child. These exact reasons mirror and highlight why children also require adult supervision in online spaces.



"Parents should definitely know who their child is talking to online, but at the same time, the child should have their own privacy as well."
A young person, 13-20 years old



ONLINE EXPERIENCES ARE REAL

Feelings and experiences in digital environments can be just as intense and real as those in any physical environment. Emotional responses like joy, sadness, and fear can arise from online interactions, making the impact of what happens through digital devices deeply meaningful. The consequences of online abuse or other harms can be just as severe and damaging as in-person abuse. Child victims of online crimes have similar trauma symptoms and healing processes than those victims of in person crimes.



“Once, my friend received a message from a completely random number saying that if you don't do something, you and your family will die. At first, we believed it, but then we told my mum and didn't do anything.”

A child, 9-11 years old



DISCUSSING ONLINE TOPICS WITH YOUR CHILD

Parents should discuss the different types of content and situations a child might encounter in digital environments with the child before they begin to use digital devices independently. It is the adult's role to explore the digital environment together with the child, discuss openly, and agree in advance on how to handle sudden confusing or frightening situations.



“Children should be taught not to believe everything they read online, as this can easily lead to adopting extremist thoughts. Parents should discuss with their child what they see online.”

A young person, 13-20 years old



A parent's positive attention towards their child's online interests supports the development of the child's healthy self-esteem, while also encouraging open communication, and strengthening the bond between parent and child. A child should feel assured that if they disclose something upsetting or confusing encountered online, they will receive discussion, support, and guidance rather than punishment or disapproval.



“It's difficult to talk to parents when their immediate response is always: You're online too much.”

A young person, 13-20 years old

“I can't tell my parents cause they just start blaming me.”

A teenager 15-16 years old



AGE LIMITS

The age ratings for apps and games are set by experts, and their purpose is to protect children. Apps and games can have content that is not suitable for children under a certain age. Some apps include functions through which a stranger can access a child. In such situations, children may not always have the skills to recognise behaviour that could lead to a crime, nor do they always know how to respond safely. Therefore, it is extremely important to follow the age ratings to keep children safe.



"If someone wants a game that's not appropriate for their age, parents shouldn't give permission for it"
A child, 9-11 years old



"Parents should know what their children are doing online."
A young person, 13-20 years old



AGE-INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

It is important to inform children in advance that, in addition to fun things, they may also encounter strange, unpleasant, or even frightening contents and situations online. Things seen on a screen can frighten a child just as much as experiences in other environments. Taking a screenshot and showing it to a safe adult is an important digital safety skill for children. It is often much easier for children to show than to describe frightening, embarrassing or confusing events to their parents.



"Parents can help their child with logging into something and remove nasty pictures."
A child, 9-11 years old



"I have spent thousands of hours online in youth digital space with young people and I have some serious concerns. Young people seem to be accessing anything they want online and there doesn't seem to be any age limits in terms of 12-year-olds playing games meant for over 18-year-olds even though this should be illegal. They also seem to access adult porn very early and consider it as normal."
A youth worker



Teach your child to first take a screenshot of enjoyable things. Practise together the skill of taking screenshots and discuss with what kind of situation or content they should take a screenshot and show it to you. Emphasise that it is not your child's fault if they encounter such content. Always praise the child when they show or tell you about content online that is not suitable for their age. A screenshot can also serve as evidence for the police in the most unpleasant digital incidents.

Parents should limit their child's access to age-inappropriate online content to protect their mental and emotional well-being. This can be partly achieved by using tools, such as parental control software, content filters, and secure browsing settings. Additionally, engaging in open conversations about such content is crucial as the tools are not able to block all age-inappropriate content. Exposure to inappropriate material can impact a child's development, leading to confusion, anxiety, or harmful behaviours if the child is left unsupported. By taking proactive steps, parents can help ensure their children navigate the internet safely and positively. This is also what children and young people are asking from us adults.



"Parents should block children from accessing porn websites."
A young person, 13-20 years old



"Parents need to monitor their child's internet usage and block certain websites/apps, especially for younger children."
A young person, 13-20 years old



"I wish that parents could set boundaries for social media but not stalk every move of their child."
A teenager 15-16 years old



"Even young primary school aged children seem to be accessing all sorts of content that is not appropriate for their age. It really confuses them, but they don't often discuss it with their parents as they worry that they will lose their phone."
A teacher



STRANGERS ONLINE

Ensure that the child does not use a profile picture that is their own or any image that could allow an outsider to identify them as a child using the app or game as strangers with bad intentions often try to contact individuals they suspect are children based on the profile picture. Children should also not share personal information publicly, such as their address, phone number, location, school, specific interests, or pictures of their pets. These topics can be discussed with children regularly in a positive and engaging way.



"When I was online, someone I didn't know asked me to go out.
I said no because I know that sometimes people get tricked."
A child, 9-11 years old



"Someone got my number and asked if we can talk. I asked
what do you want and he didn't reply."
A child, 9-11 years old



ONLINE GAMING

Strangers with bad intentions don't only reach out to children through social media; they also exploit chat functions in online games, particularly in those popular among younger players. These individuals often attempt to lure children away from open game platforms to more secure messaging apps by, for example, promising in-game assistance. It's essential for children to understand that they should not transition from gaming platforms to messaging apps. If they are allowed to use chat features within games, they should focus solely on discussing game-related topics and avoid sharing any other information.



"I like it when someone helps me in the game I play online"
A child, 9-11 years old



CHILD'S PRIVACY

It is important for parents to respect their child's privacy by refraining from posting pictures of them online, especially without consent because children have a right to control their own digital identity. By being mindful of what they share, parents show good example and help create a safe and respectful environment for their child's development in an increasingly digital world.



“I wish that parents didn't post pictures or other personal things about their children on social media.”

A teenager 15-16 years old



Children should be taught not to share everything online to protect their personal information and maintain their privacy. Oversharing can lead to various risks, including cyberbullying, identity theft, and unwanted attention from strangers. Teaching kids about digital footprints helps them understand that their online actions can have long-term consequences. Having a family rule of not taking a phone into the bathroom or toilet protects the child from taking and sharing intimate photos accidentally or on impulse.



“Adults should teach children to think properly before posting anything online”

A young person, 13-20 years old



CHILDREN'S & YOUNG PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOUR ONLINE

Parents can guide children to behave online just as they would in other environments, through examples and open discussions, by emphasising key skills like respect, kindness, and responsibility. It is important for children to understand the impact of their words and actions online. While adult offenders pose a significant risk to children online, peers can also be a source of harm and abuse. Teaching children to think critically before posting, to respect others, including asking friends' consent before posting anything about them online and to seek help when encountering negative situations fosters a safer and more positive online experience.



"Parents should teach children to behave online in the same way they would behave in real life"

A young person, 13-20 years old



"Parents believe that their child wouldn't do anything stupid online. They shouldn't always trust their own child, as even well-behaved kids can bully. They should discuss all this with their children."

A young person, 13-20 years old



"Young people themselves are often the ones who behave badly towards others online. Rarely do I need to 'protect' young people from what an unknown person says to them in a game. On the contrary, I often have to have discussions with especially new young users about what should not be said to others"

A youth worker



TAKING A BREAK FROM DIGITAL DEVICES AND SPENDING TIME TOGETHER AS A FAMILY!

It is a good idea to collect the family's phones and other devices in common areas, such as a phone parking lot, well before bedtime. It is easier for children to get lost in strange paths online behind closed doors at night, so learning the habit of keeping phones outside the bedroom overnight protects the child and ensures better sleep. Instead of a phone, a regular alarm clock can be used to wake the child up in the morning!

Practicing regular breaks from digital devices together and replacing that time with shared activities promotes a more balanced family life that encompasses both online and offline experiences. This approach encourages connection and meaningful interactions, helping everyone to enjoy a healthier mix of screen time and quality family time.



"Teenagers' internet usage should be restricted (certain websites), and it would be good to have a daily time limit on how much they can use devices."

A young person, 13-20 years old

"To keep children safe parents can limit phone usage and certain apps and reduce screen time"

A child, 9-11 years old



PAUSE FOR A MOMENT...

If, after reading this document, you feel compelled to warn your child about online dangers and restrict all their online activities, it is important to pause before acting. Children will inevitably access digital environments, and it is more beneficial for them to learn essential digital safety skills in a safe, supportive context with their parents.

Instead, consider asking your teenager to share their favourite website or channel with you, or join your child in playing their favourite online game. By engaging in your child's positive online experiences, you not only enjoy the digital life together, but you also build trust and create an opportunity for open discussions for more challenging topics. This positive approach and your presence will protect your child in digital environments.

ENJOY DIGITAL LIFE TOGETHER!



"We adults need clear and simple guidelines on digital safety. The internet can also be a safe place for many young people to interact socially with others, and the hope is that it will continue to be so."

A teacher



ABOUT US

Protect Children is a non-governmental child-rights organisation based in Helsinki, Finland, working globally to end all forms of sexual violence against children.

Learn more about Protect Children:
<https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en>

This guide has been produced as a part of Project 2KNOW, a two-year project funded by the European Commission, dedicated to improving the ecosystem of prevention and response to online crimes of sexual violence against children.

Learn more about the project:
<https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en/2know>