



“Let’s talk about online relationships”

a guide for parents and carers

Children find internet communication and social networking fun and safe most of the time. But things can go wrong. As a parent or carer you can help protect your child by talking together about online relationships.

This guide will give you practical tips about how you can help your child to be in control and enjoy safe online relationships. Children say that they want their parents to be the first to talk to them about relationships. Many parents fail to do this because they find it embarrassing or difficult. If you feel you don’t have technical know-how don’t worry. The main thing is to have the confidence to start talking.

We believe that it is never too early to talk to your child about relationships online... and if you think you have missed the chance for this kind of conversation it is not too late to start. So here are some tips.

1. It’s about friendships and relationships

Adults can easily forget how much friends matter to children and teenagers. It is a normal part of a child’s development to want to ‘belong’ and to have lots of friends. This is equally true for relationships online – there is pressure to be seen as popular, and this can mean that children ‘friend’ as many people as possible on social networking sites. To your child these ‘friendships’ matter.

As children grow up they naturally become more curious about romantic relationships. The internet can seem like an easier place to explore these relationships because they may feel less shy in the ‘virtual world’.

What you can do

- Talk to your child about what it is to be a friend – explain the value of true friendship – such as trust, respect and kindness.
- Show them the value of their friendship to others. Help them to recognise when other people may be bullying them online.
- Don’t humiliate or belittle their desire for a romantic or sexual relationship but do discuss some of the risks of online relationships – such as people putting up fake profiles or sharing your private thoughts and feelings with other people.
- Don’t be afraid of technology....let your child be in control by showing you the sorts of sites they like to visit to make friends, or to link up with friends and peers. Ask them to show you how you set the privacy settings or how you would block someone that is upsetting you. If they don’t know, then make time to learn together.



2. Remember it's not easy working out who you are and who you want to be.

*"Whats wrong with sexting anyway? Its flattering when a boy asks you to send them a picture". Young person aged 14 **

A huge part of growing up is working out who it is we are and who we want to be in the future. Children and teenagers are also under a lot of pressure from their friends and peers to look and behave a certain way. This is also true online – for example you may wonder why your child shares certain photos online, and why they appear to promote an image that doesn't seem to reflect who you think they are.

What you can do

- Don't be afraid to talk to your child about photos and images online that could be seen as 'sexy' or provocative . Ask them why they think people upload certain photos and what messages they think these photos give out.
- Listen rather than judge. Try asking your child what he/she thinks
- Talk positively about your child's emerging personality and the positive ways in which they are expressing it, for example in clothing, activities or behaviour – both offline and online. You might start your comment "I like it when you....."

3. Sometimes your child may shock you

It can be a big shock to discover that your child has been involved in a bullying incident online – and maybe not as a victim, but as one of the people using bullying behaviour. The language children use with friends and peers can be shocking too... be it violent, offensive or sexual. Every parent wants to believe that their child would never share an offensive photos or videos , or consider sending personal images of themselves but research shows that this is happening.

"I had this boy always asking me to send him pictures, like, every day." Young person aged 14

What you can do

- It's natural for a child or teenager to moderate their behaviour and language around their parents, but it is important that you talk to them about what the effect of using violent or offensive language can be – particularly if that language is used online where there is a permanent record.
- Talk to your child about bullying behaviour online and why it's wrong. Explain that this includes passing on hurtful comments, photos or videos that someone else has sent to you. Ask 'would you say that or show that to someone in the same room as you...' and 'if not why not'.
- Talk to your child about your values as a family, what matters to you, and how you would expect to see these values modelled whether you are there or not.

- Ask your child if they know about the risks of sharing images or videos of a sexual nature. Are they aware that sometimes a request to send a nude image may have been sent to lots of people at once, and that the pictures will stay online permanently and can be shared with many other people too?
- Encourage your child to report upsetting or offensive content to an adult they trust or to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP).

4. What you think matters

You may sometimes feel that your child doesn't listen to you or value what you think. Research shows that while children don't necessarily want their parents hanging over their shoulder whenever they are online, they do want their parents to talk to them about their online behaviour and to set appropriate boundaries.

What you can do

- Do step in when you think your child is engaging in risky behaviour online. If you have an open relationship with your child where you have discussed how you would expect them to behave online, and what the risks can be, it should make your actions easier to understand.
- Talk to your children regularly about your views and values on friendships and relationships.
- If it all feels too personal, try talking about people in situations in books, films, and favourite television programmes such as soaps.

5. Always keep an open door

Sadly there are cases where situations have spiralled out of control online and children have not felt able to talk to their parents. For example, a child may be involved in a cyberbullying incident that is deeply upsetting, or they may be being stalked or harassed by someone who they have shared personal information or images with. What may have initially seemed like an exciting new romance or friendship could have turned into something frightening and they may not know how to get out of the situation.

"The trouble is, my mum would overreact and stop me from using my phone" young person aged 14

"No way would I turn to my parents for help, my dad would kill anyone who asked me to do that" young person aged 14

What you can do

- Always answer your child's questions about relationships, sex and growing up and don't be afraid to say: ' I really don't know – let's work it out or look it up together'.
- Make sure they know that they can talk to you if any situation gets out of control.
- Let them know that there are other people that can help if they don't think they can tell you – for example they can contact Childline by phone and online, 24 hours a day by calling 0800 11 11 or visiting www.childline.org.uk.
- Make sure your child knows that while you may not always like or approve of what they do – and this includes what they do online, you will always love them and are always there for them.

This guide has been produced as part of Safer Internet Day 2013.

More information

For help with technical solutions including internet controls visit: www.saferinternetday.org.

For advice about bullying visit: www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk.

For sex and relationships education advice visit: www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/parents-carers.aspx

1 The comments from young people published in this guide are from research by Andy Phippen: 'Sexting; an Exploration of Practices, Attitudes and Influences' published in 2012 by NSPCC and the UK Safer Internet Centre.*

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