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Together 
for Families

Digital Resilience

Guidance for people supporting
SEND young people



www.cornwall.gov.uk/togetherforfamilies

Purpose

This information is aimed at parents/carers and professionals who support young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It is not a resource to use with young people, but instead some guidance on digital issues which you may have concerns about.

You know the young people you support best, so this guidance doesn't intend to tell you how to do what you do, instead we hope it will act as reassurance and a place to refer to make sure everyone is giving the same information to young people.

We also don't expect you to read this guidance once and remember everything it covers, instead it can be a useful resource to return to if issues arise. For that reason, some of the advice is repeated through this guidance.

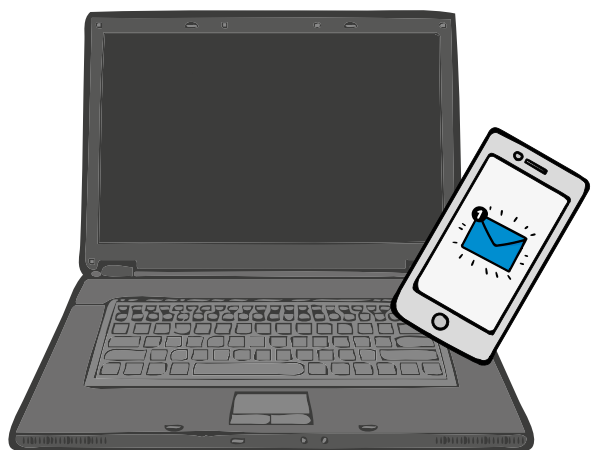
There are many ways that the digital world can have a positive impact upon a young person's life, it gives people space to learn and play, a way to stay connected to loved ones, and for some people it is also a place where they don't feel disabled. However, there are also activities online we might consider to be risky. Taking risks should be seen as part of engaging with the online world. Often, these are a normal part of young people's development and are similar to risks they may take in the offline world.

However, there are some activities that young people may undertake without fully understanding what they are doing, how they might mitigate risks, and what the potential consequences are. As adults, we have a better understanding of risk and how to engage with risky behaviour in an informed manner, and therefore are well placed to support young people to make positive decisions online. This is especially important for neurodiverse and SEND young people, who can struggle to make sense of messages about 'staying safe' online, especially if those messages seem contradictory, rely on euphemisms or metaphors or seem to be telling them not to do things they enjoy without explaining why.

This guidance does not use scare-tactics, as we don't want to make young people feel unnecessarily worried about engaging with the online world. Instead, it includes straight forward advice to help you, and the young people you support understand the risks and enjoy the online world.

We've organised this information into categories, based on the Digital Resilience Tool (available at <https://www.headstartkernow.org.uk/digital-resilience/>).





Devices

There is no age at which it's safe for any young person to own a digital device, like a phone or tablet. Depending on the young person's needs, they may use devices to help with communication or as a way of managing their feelings. Increasingly, there is less of a line between being online and offline, as we organise activities through messaging apps, send pictures and stream music, all whilst being out in the real world. For this reason, we don't recommend banning a device as punishment or having strict limits on how long can be spent on a device. Instead, limits on certain apps may be more appropriate (this can be managed through parental controls or screen time functions), and it's good to talk about these limits and why they are being applied.

There is no right or wrong amount of screen time

A good variety of activities is more important than strict rules about the length of time on a screen.

Avoid blue light immediately before / after bedtime

If screens must be used (eg as part of bedtime routine) ensure they are switched to night shift to reduce blue light. Search 'turn on night shift' for details of how to do this on different devices.

Parental controls are useful but not perfect

Setting up parental controls on a device will filter certain content but it's not perfect. For younger children supervision is important, for older young people you could consider removing controls and discussing content regularly (see relationships and sex for more information).

Education

Increasingly, homework and educational activities involve using a digital device. Work set is likely to suggest use of specific sites and apps. Young people may also be interested in how devices and software work, this is great and should be encouraged.

Research alone can be risky

Young people may look up information on issues which they are worried about (such as losing weight, drugs, and sex). We would recommend ensuring they know where to find reliable information such as the NHS website, Talk to Frank or Brook - these sites could be bookmarked. We would also recommend having regular conversations about why getting information from other sites could be a problem - e.g. information could be incorrect (e.g. sites that promise weight loss results), it might be aimed at older people (e.g. harm reduction information about drugs), it might not be relevant (e.g. information about medical conditions), it might be commercial and being misleading in order to sell products (e.g. "buy this product to be safe online").

Extremism

Accessing extremist content is upsetting

Many things might fall under the banner of 'extremism', but much of it is likely to be graphic and upsetting. Even if parental controls are in place, it's important to talk about this content as extremism might be seen on social media. Young people should know if they do see something upsetting they can talk to you about it without getting into trouble.

Some content is illegal

Anything which encourages someone to hurt someone else is illegal. Teaching young people how to report this content is useful. You can get more information at the Report Harmful Content website (www.reportharmfulcontent.com).

Curiosity isn't a crime

Wanting to know more about extremist groups, especially if they have been talked about in school or in the media, is normal. The best way to find out about groups would be to search with the young person, rather than leaving them to find out on their own. Sites like Wikipedia are more likely to have honest information about extremist groups, we don't recommend going to an extremist group's website.

Friends and Family

Using digital media to communicate with friends and family, meeting up with existing friends and sharing content are all normal activities.

Always take a trusted adult when meeting someone new

If young people have joined online groups and want to meet up with the people they've met, this can be managed safely. As long as a trusted adult accompanies the young person and meetings take place in a public place.

Online friends are strangers until you meet them in real life

Young people may chat to strangers in games and on social media. They may begin to feel that they know the person, but until they've actually met that person they can't be sure they are who they say they are. It's important to have regular conversations about this, being specific about people the young person is talking to, rather than talking generally about people online. A young person might have a video call with an online friend and might feel very confident they know them, but it's easy to put on an act on a video call, and much harder to maintain that in real life. Any meet-ups with online friends (or potential boyfriends or girlfriends) should be supervised for the first meeting at least. The other person should expect that and will probably want to bring a friend, carer or parent as well.

If someone says no, respect their decision

Young people might want to share content they've seen with other young people who might find that content distressing. Also, young people might put pictures on social media of their friends and they might be asked to remove them. It's important to respect other people when they say no and to remove content as requested.



Gaming

Gaming can be fun and a great way to relax and unwind. There is no evidence suggesting that violent games make people violent. However, games can be frustrating and this can lead to outbursts. It's useful to have rules in place to avoid conflict and help young people manage their frustration, this might be the length of time games can be played for, or what they can do if they feel frustrated (like hitting a cushion rather than throwing a controller or device across the room).

A warning will be given before 'switch off time'

If you're aware a young person is getting stressed or overwhelmed as a result of gaming, give them a few minutes warning before you ask them to stop playing. They might need to get to a certain point to save a game so this will allow them to do that.

Gaming is fun, but shouldn't get in the way of other things

There's lots of talk about games being addictive, but rather than getting too caught up in worrying about addiction and dependence, a simple rule of thumb is that gaming shouldn't stop the young person doing other things, like going to school, doing homework and spending time with friends and family. If gaming does get in the way of these things, it could be a sign that the behaviour is compulsive, so having a break from it is important. It's good to have other activities planned - playing a game because there's nothing else to do isn't a sign of addiction.

Decisions on whether a game is suitable aren't just about age ratings

It's not illegal for a 15 year old to play a 16 rated game, but the restrictions are there to help you work out whether the game is suitable for the young person. Games like Fifa have a PEGI rating of 3 years, but may cause more upset than any other games. The important thing is to know what the content of the game is, rather than relying too heavily on age restrictions. However, for older rated games it's always good to either check them out first, or sit with the young person when they are playing it, rather than leaving them on their own.

Games might ask for money - you don't have to pay

Some games might have 'in game purchases'. This could be for 'skins' eg a different outfit for the character, or it could be for 'loot crates' which are like a lucky dip. Other games might have ads within the game which might then ask you to pay to download them. Parents/carers should ensure the young person's account is not linked to credit card/payment information to avoid accidental purchases. Discussing whether items will be purchased in games should be no different than discussing purchases in real life. If game items are given as gifts from family or friends (Roblox in particular sell gift cards), this should be with the awareness of parents/carers. Another thing to check is a parent hasn't left their credit card details on a device if the young person uses that to go online.

Relationships and Sex

A growing interest in relationships and sex is normal for all young people. Sometimes, SEND young people may seem less mature than their peers, but this doesn't mean they don't get a heavy dose of hormones throughout their teens. Therefore, it's important to talk about all aspects of relationships and sex with all young people, including digital aspects of relationships. These ideas should be discussed regularly throughout adolescence as their relevance will change over time.

The digital world also leads to a risk that young people will start a relationship with someone who they think is the same age as them, but is actually an adult. Having regular conversations about this, with specific examples of people the young person talks to online, is important to help them understand

what we mean. Generalised talk of 'strangers' can be unhelpful as young people are unlikely to think of their online friends as strangers.

Consent

Consent, at its core, is about respecting and acknowledging each person's right to make decisions about their own body and personal space. Talking about consent is not only about personal safety but also about fostering self-esteem and mutual respect. Parents can play a crucial role by modelling consent in everyday interactions and using clear, simple language to discuss the concept. Encouraging young people to express their comfort levels, and to respect others' boundaries, lays a foundation for healthy relationships in the future.

If someone asks for nudes (sexy pics), you can say no

Friends, classmates or people online might ask for nudes, sexy pics etc and it can seem like everyone does it all the time. It's important to talk about how asking for nudes can be problematic and other people often don't like being asked for them. It's really important that young people know how to say no in a way the young person feels comfortable with (not all teenagers will want to have a debate about peer pressure, especially if the person asking is a friend or peer). The Zipit App from Childline provides lighthearted responses to requests for nudes.

Asking for nudes can put pressure on other people

Most young people won't consider how their actions can make other people feel bad. They should also understand why asking for nudes is problematic and people will not appreciate being asked for them. Sometimes just talking about this can help, other times it might be better to make it a rule - don't ask people for nudes.

Sharing nudes with others is never ok

If a young person is sent a nude, whether of a friend, partner or classmate, sharing it on is never ok. If it's been shared by someone else (ie not the person in the picture), it's best to tell someone, like a teacher. Sending it on could put the young person in the picture at risk of harm, and is illegal if the person in the picture is under 18. Even if everyone else is sharing it, it's not ok to do it too. Young people should also know that if they are sent nudes they did not ask for, it is not their fault and they won't get into trouble if they tell someone about it.

Porn isn't like real-life sex

Lots of young people watch porn and there are lots of reasons, from curiosity, to sexual gratification, to wanting to know what goes where. It's really important that young people know porn isn't like real life sex: most penises and boobs aren't that big, body hair is normal and most people don't do it in those positions - porn positions are all about how it looks on camera, not how it feels to the people doing it. If they are thinking about engaging in sexual activity of any sort (touching, oral, or penetrative), they should make sure they've talked to their partner about what they are both comfortable with and know about contraception and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Everyone has a right to privacy online

There are lots of apps that allow people to track their friends or partners, and some young people might willingly share their social media passwords with each other. However, it's important that young people know that friends can stop this at any time and they should respect other people's boundaries around what information they're willing to share.

Social Media

Social media can be a great way to connect with other people around the world. But there have been increasing concerns about technology being designed to be addictive. The good news is, much of this can be overcome with some very simple rules to stay in control.

Social media should be fun - if it makes you sad, have a break

If a young person is using social media too much, it probably won't feel fun, instead it might make them feel really stressed or they might feel anxious when they can't use it. This is a good time to have a break and do other things they enjoy.

Filters should be fun - if they make you sad, have a break

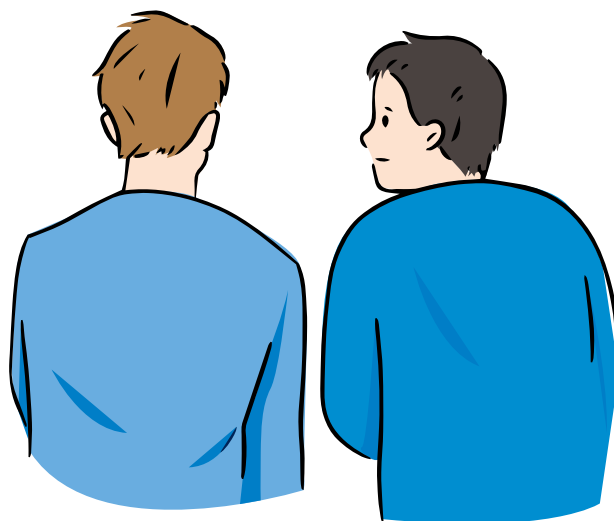
Using filters or airbrushing images has become extremely common. Most young people will have fun messing around with them. If a young person starts to feel like they can't bear to look at themselves without a filter on, this is a problem. They might need to have a break from using filters and from social media where lots of people are using filters.

Being an influencer is a full time job

Being an influencer is a desirable job for lots of young people. They might start putting lots of energy into growing their online following in the hopes they'll start to make money from it. But this can become a full time job with very little financial reward. Most influencers do not make very much money at all, there are very few that can make it a job. And it can be exhausting because it's with them all day and night. It's important to talk about balance and having a break from it when they need to.

Online friends are strangers until you meet them in real life

Young people may chat to strangers on social media and dating sites. They may begin to feel that they know the person, but until they've actually met that person they can't be sure they are who they say they are. It's important to have regular conversations about this, being specific about people the young person is talking to, rather than talking generally about people online. A young person might have a video call with an online friend and might feel very confident they know them, but it's easy to put on an act on a video call, and much harder to maintain that act in real life. Any meet-ups with online friends (or potential boyfriends or girlfriends) should be supervised for the first meeting at least. The other person should expect that and will probably want to bring a friend, carer or parent as well.



Watching Content

Most young people will watch online content. This could be on Netflix, YouTube, TikTok or iPlayer. Whilst it's tempting to say iPlayer is less of a problem than YouTube, the reality is young people might come across upsetting content anywhere, even with parental controls in place.

If you see something upsetting, tell someone

For young people, this could be anything from online ghost stories to animal cruelty stories - even if it's from animal rights charities. Watching the news is one of the main places young people see upsetting content. Make sure they know who to talk to if they see something upsetting. Try not to over-react if they tell you they've seen something upsetting. Banning them from accessing certain apps is less effective than talking about what they saw and why it upset them, as well as how they can change their setting to avoid seeing similar content in future.



Contact us

 www.headstartkernow.org.uk

 www.startnowcornwall.org.uk

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