

Tips for Encouraging Open Discussions about Digital Lives

At National Online Safety, we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one of many issues which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.

Tips for Encouraging Open Discussions about DIGITAL LIVES

The online world is an entirely familiar and commonplace part of life for today's children and young people, far more so than for previous generations. There are many positives to children being able to access online materials, so it's important not to demonise the internet, games and apps, and limit the benefit of their positive aspects. At the same time, we do have a responsibility to educate children about the hazards they may encounter online (just as we would about real-world dangers) so it's essential that we don't shy away from talking to them about the complex – and often sensitive – subject of what they do and what they see when they're online.

Here are some suggestions for kicking off conversations with your child about their digital life...

MAKE YOUR INTEREST CLEAR

Showing enthusiasm when you broach the subject signals to your child that you're keen to learn about the positives of their online world. Most children enjoy educating adults and will happily chat about what they use the internet for, or what games and apps they're into and how these work. Asking to see their favourite games and apps in action could help you spot any aspects that may need your attention – such as chat functions which might require a settings adjustment to limit contact with strangers. Keep listening even if your child pauses for a long time; they could be considering how to phrase something specific, or they may be gauging your reaction.

BE OPEN AND HONEST, APPROPRIATE TO THEIR AGE

At various stages, children and young people become curious about puberty and how their body changes; about relationships; about how babies are made; and about sexual health. If your child knows that they can discuss these sensitive subjects with you, they tend to be less likely to go looking online for answers – which can often provide them with misleading information and, in some cases, lead to them consuming harmful content. Don't worry if you don't immediately know the answers to their questions – just find out for yourself and go back to them once you have the facts.

REMINDE YOUR CHILD THEY CAN ALWAYS TALK TO YOU

In my role I work with many children and young people who admit being reluctant to tell a trusted adult about harmful content they've viewed online. In some it leads to having their devices confiscated. Emphasise to your child that you're always there to listen and help; reassure them that if they do view harmful content, then they are not to blame – but talking about it openly will help. Children shouldn't be expected to be resilient against abuse or feel that it's their job to prevent it.

KEEP TALKING!

The most valuable advice we can give is to keep talking with your child about their digital lives. You could try using everyday situations to ask questions about their online experiences.

DISCUSS THAT NOT EVERYTHING WE SEE ONLINE IS REAL

Here, you could give examples from your own digital life of the online world versus reality – for example, those 'perfect' house, speedily cleaned, never messy and immaculately decorated, appear to your child that there are many other aspects of the online world which are also deliberately presented in an unrealistic way for effect – such as someone's relationship, their body, having perfect skin and so on.

TRY TO REMAIN CALM

As much as possible, try to stay calm even if your child tells you about an online experience that makes you feel angry or fearful. Our immediate emotions frequently influence the way we talk, so it's possible that your initial reaction as a parent or carer could deter a child from speaking openly about what they've seen. Give yourself time to consider the right approach, and perhaps speak with other family members or school staff while you are considering your next steps.

CREATE A 'FAMILY AGREEMENT'

Involving your whole household in coming up with a family agreement about device use can be immensely beneficial. You could discuss when (and for how long) it's OK to use phones, tablets, consoles and so on at home; what parental controls are for and why they're important; and why it's good to talk to each other about things we've seen or experienced online (both good and bad). Explaining your reasoning will help children to understand that, as trusted adults, we want to make sure they are well informed and kept safe. Allowing children to have their say when coming up with your family agreement also makes them more likely to stick to it in the long term.

Meet Our Expert

Believe, Jennings of NASU (Driving Awareness in Sex Education) has almost 20 years' experience in delivering relationship and sex education and training to schools, colleges and other education providers. A published author on the subject, she also advises the Department of Education on the youth training element of the school curriculum.

NOS National Online Safety®
#WakeUpWednesday

www.nationalonlinesafety.com @natonlinesafety /NationalOnlineSafety @nationalonlinesafety

Users of this guide do so at their own discretion. No liability is entered into. Current as of the date of release: 01.03.2023

Next Tuesday (7 February) is Safer Internet Day: the annual event to promote the safe, responsible and positive use of digital tech among children and young people. This year's title is 'Want to talk about it? Making space for conversations about life online' – giving young voices a platform to shape the kinds of online safety support that they receive.

Simply checking in with children regularly about their experiences – both good and bad – in the digital world is a brilliant way to engage with what they're currently into online, while also acting as a valuable early warning system about potential issues. To support Safer Internet Day, this week's #WakeUpWednesday guide has some top tips for initiating these helpful catch-up chats. One of the most eye-catching results of a survey that we conducted last year (taking in more than 1,000 UK parents and carers) was that more than one in six – 18% – *never* talk to their child about staying safe online. There are many quite understandable reasons for this, such as feeling that their child is still too young, or assuming that they're being taught online safety at school.

The fact remains, however, that regular conversations about our digital lives can help children keep online safety firmly in mind and avoid many common internet hazards. Our #WakeUpWednesday guide this week has some ideas for starting these beneficial chats with children – letting them know that you're taking a keen interest without making it feel like an interrogation.

Please [click here](#) to download the guide