Online Critical Thinking Guide

internet matters.org

Supporting children to be safe and savvy online.

Top tips to empower children to make smarter informed choices to navigate their online world safely.

1. Tackling fake news

Fake news (misinformation and disinformation) seems to be everywhere and it can be difficult to know what you can trust online. Here is a range of things you can do to support children and young people on this issue:

Conversations to have

- Explain to children that it is important that they don't take everything at face value.
- Encourage them to question things – does it look right? Have they seen the story elsewhere? Where did they find it? Was it shared on a site?
- Visit our Fake news and misinformation advice hub to get more in depth advice to support your child

Things to do together

- One thing that we can all do to limit the spread of dubious content, is to be very careful before sharing content that could be misleading – **check it first and if in doubt don't share!**
- The more we read and follow one point of view, the more likely we see similar viewpoints. Explain to children that this is how the algorithms work online. This is known as a filter bubble and one way of combatting this is to **seek out points of view which are different from our own** online in order **to get a balanced view of what is happening.**
- Test your knowledge on fake news and misinformation by taking our fun Find the Fake quiz together with your child. Use it as a way to have more conversations to build children's understanding of what it is, how to spot it and stop it from spreading.

2. Making and managing relationships online

More and more children are choosing the online world to grow their friendship circles and form romantic relationships so, it's now more important than ever to help them develop critical thinking to make safe choices with the people they interact with online.

Encouraging kids to seek support

One of the most important things is to ensure children talk to someone if they feel something isn't quite right.

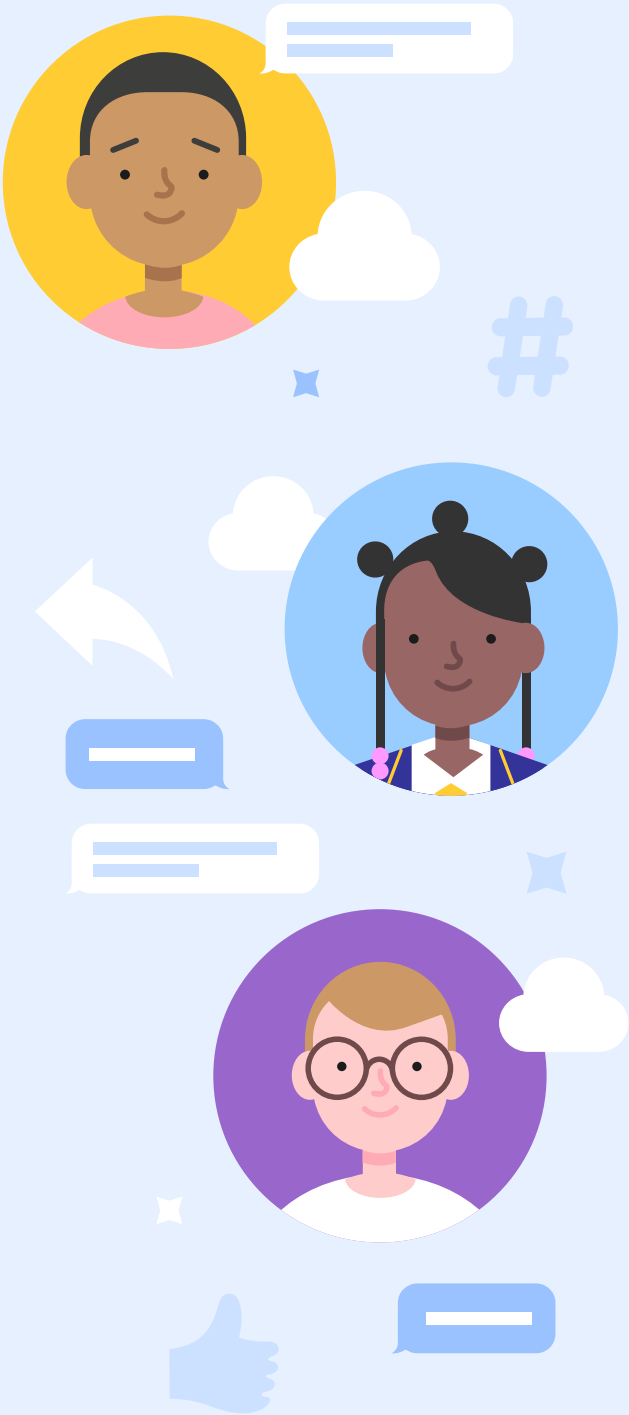
- If someone that they are connected to says or does something that makes them feel worried, upset or frightened they can and should take control, speak to someone and block or report them.
- If they can't talk to you, make sure they have other trusted people and organisations they can talk to, to get the right advice.
- Children will be less inclined to share their concerns if they fear they will be told to stop using a certain platform, so it's best to keep an open mind and work together to resolve any issues they face.

Conversations to have

- The changing nature of children's interactions online, particularly with the rise of gaming, may mean that they will be talking to strangers so to help them stay safe, encourage them **to trust their instincts,** if something doesn't feel quite right then it probably isn't.
- **Advise them to think carefully about the information that they share,** make sure they are not afraid to block someone or report them if they have concerns.
- **Talk to your child about** peer pressure so they don't feel under pressure to do anything that they don't feel comfortable with online.
- **If your teen is online dating, use our** Teens and Online Dating guide to equip them with the tools they need to make safe choices about who they talk to, what they share and who they trust to reduce exposure to potential online risks.
- **Create an environment where children feel confident to share their concerns** with you without the fear of being stopped from using a particular platform, game or online space. See our conversation starter tips guide for support

Things to do together

- Have a look at the 'What is a friend' activity and work through some of these with your child to help them build a good understanding of genuine friendship.



3. Managing personal information online

With the growing number of scams, malware and viruses that have been circulating recently it's important to give children tools to manage their personal information. Here are some simple things you can do to keep your family's devices and personal information safer.

Conversations to have

- **Remind children of the importance of passwords** – the length of the password determines how strong it is and how likely it is to be cracked. The latest advice is to use three random words to create your password but of course it's important not to use things like our child's name, our partner's name or other things that are too easy for someone to guess. Have a conversation with your child about passwords and their importance – you could also consider using a password manager to help your family to create strong passwords. Many children will share passwords with their friends, indeed some have said that this is a sign of friendship and so it is quite common to find that they all know the passcodes for each other's phones and accounts. Having a conversation with children about why this could cause problems is important.

- **You should also ensure that your child's devices are protected** with anti-virus and malware protection – more information can be found here.

Things to do together

- To help your child create strong passwords, use the Bee Secure site to test out suggestions together.

- You can also use this Cyber Security Activity Pack from ThinkuKnow and The National Cyber Security Centre to help your family learn more about how to be cyber aware.

4. Strategies to use when things go wrong online

If something goes wrong online, it's important to give children ways to seek help before it happens, especially if it's something that they feel they can't share with you.

Conversations to have

- **Make them aware of other possible reporting routes.** There may be another adult that they could turn to for help, it doesn't always need to be us as their parent – discuss the other trusted adults that they could approach and explain that they can also report any problems to the site, game, social networking site – wherever it happened.

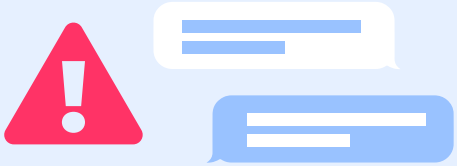
- **Doing nothing is not the best solution** as the same issue could affect others, so even if they're not too concerned about what has happened, reporting it could help protect others and this can sometimes help to encourage children and young people to do the right thing and support others.

- **Reinforce the message that it's not always their fault** and that as their parent you just want to protect them and make sure that they are safe. You can find out how to make a report to many of the main platforms here.

Things to do together

- Spend some time looking at the different reporting routes on services, games and apps that your child uses. **Ensure that they know how to use these tools** but also reinforce that they can come and speak to you about any problems that they encounter and remind them that you won't overreact!

- For children aged 13 or older you can visit the report harmful content hub and look at the different types of content that can be reported and see the platforms that they can provide support for.



5. Setting up safely

Whichever devices your child is using to get online to play online games or to communicate with others, they all have tools and settings that can give you and your child more control over the content that can be accessed, the amount of time they are able to spend on different platforms and who is able to contact them.

Conversations to have

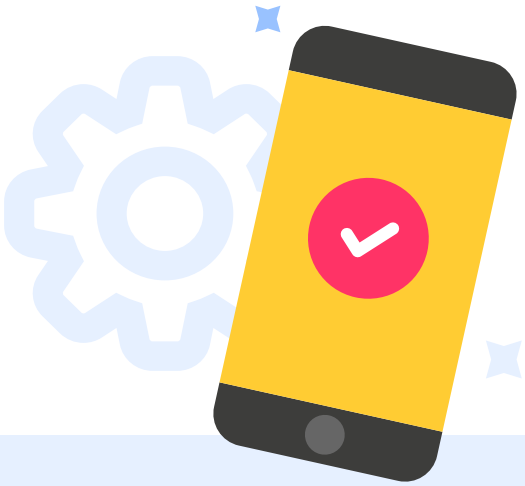
- **Explain why you are setting up some controls on your child's device.** Just as there are rules in the offline parts of their lives to keep them safe, there also needs to be some guidance and boundaries when they are online. You can set these up together and review them regularly.

- As they get older and start to get more independent online ***encourage them to take more ownership of setting up these boundaries*** *and start to self-regulate their device use.*

Things to do together

- Taking some time to **set this up at the outset alongside your child if possible,** is a good idea and there are helpful guides on how to do this available here.

- Many of the **more popular platforms now allow parents to link their accounts to their child's account giving some valuable oversight.** Setting these things up collaboratively is the best approach. Children readily accept that their parents have rules and guidance in place for things that they are doing offline and it should be the same with any online interactions and activity.



6. Balancing screen time

While it can be a struggle for us all to keep on top of our screen time particularly with virtual meet ups and home learning becoming the norm, it's important to encourage children to think about how they use their time to strike a healthy balance.

Conversations to have

- Most devices will provide information about just how much time we have spent over a day or week, they will even break down how much time was spent on a particular app and game. Have a look at these with your child – ask them to guess how much time they have spent before you look together! Were they surprised? What do they think would be a reasonable amount of time to spend online each day? What does that equate to over a week/month/year?

- When children are old enough to understand, talk to them about persuasive design and how many of the apps and games that we use have been designed to try and keep us spending more and more time online so it isn't always easy to reduce this.

Things to do together

- Tools will allow you to set limits or at least notify you once a limit has been reached. Visit our screen time advice hub for more information on how to access the tools. Try and make time to set these up with your child.

7. Deal with online issues – Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is when someone bullies others using electronic means, this might involve social media and messaging services on the internet, accessed on a mobile phone, tablet or gaming platform. The behaviour is usually repeated and at times can be as subtle as leaving someone out of a group chat or cropping them out of a picture.

While cyberbullying is more likely to be experienced by older teens and tweens as they start to interact with others, it's important to encourage children early on to adopt good online manners when it comes to expressing feelings and emotions online.

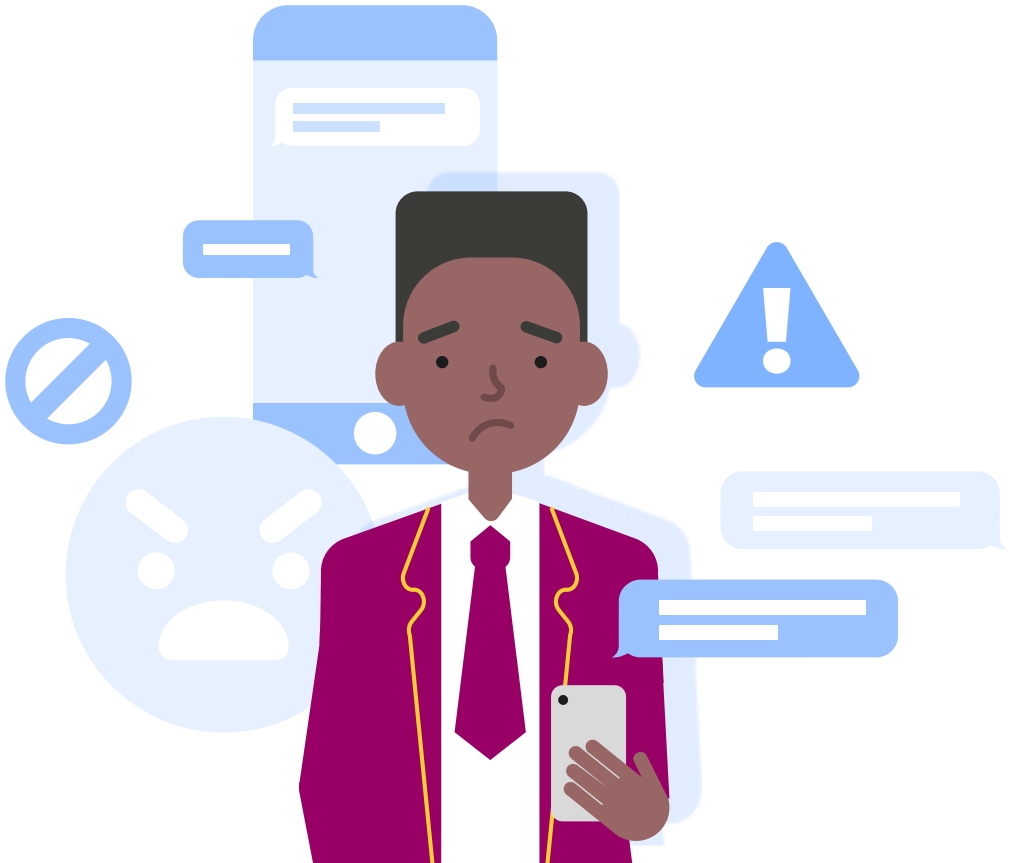
- Sadly it is quite common with many people thinking that if they say unkind things about someone online they can be anonymous and not have to deal with any consequences. **Not being able to see the reaction of the person you are bullying or being unkind to reduce the chance of any empathy and we know that people will often say and do things online that they wouldn't dream of saying or doing in a face to face** situation where facial expressions, body language and tone of voice could all provide clues as to how someone was feeling about what was being said.

Conversations to have

- Unfortunately many people think that there is no point in reporting cyberbullying as nothing can be done about it. This is not true and it is important to encourage children to challenge cyberbullying whether it is happening to them or to someone else – **they shouldn't ignore it and assume that someone else will deal with it**.
- Ask them if they are aware of friends who have been cyberbullied? – What happened? – How was it dealt with? Did their friend get the help and support they needed?
- Speaking to someone and asking for help and support is crucial.
- Reassure them that if they don't get the right support or information the first time then they shouldn't give up – you can find a range of organisations who can provide help here.

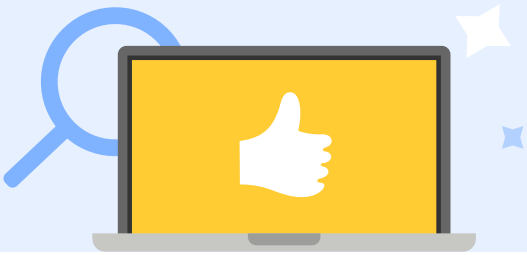
Things to do together

- Check privacy settings on social networking platforms to make sure that your child is in control of who can comment on their posts. Visit our social media how-to guide for tips on how to get these set up.
- Show them the tools that will allow them to block a post or report another user for cyberbullying (or other issues).



8. Managing their online reputation

Some children and young people are under the impression that they don't really need to worry about online reputation until they start applying for jobs or places at college or university but this is not the case and there have been several recent examples where something that someone did online whilst they were still at school has come back to cause them problems years later. Here are some things you can do to help them think more critically about their own digital footprint.



Conversations to have

- Starting conversations early on about reputation is important and quite often using some of these examples in the media can be a good way to open up some discussion around these issues.
- For in depth tips to support your child on this see our online reputation top tips

Things to do together

- Sit down with your child and Google someone that they know – perhaps a family member – what information can they find? Were they surprised at how much information there is?
- Use a range of different search tools to see if there are differences in the content that is returned.

9. Harmful content

Much of the content that our children consume is user-generated content. The social networking sites and gaming platforms all moderate content but this will never be 100% accurate. Any user is likely to experience some content that they might find upsetting. So, it is important to encourage children to speak to someone if they have had an unpleasant experience online.

Conversations to have

- Talk about the type of content that your children have seen online – the positive as well as the more challenging. **What would they do if they did see something unpleasant? Make it clear that they can come and speak to you** (or another trusted adult who could be a family friend, older sibling or another family member). Remember to reinforce that if something has gone wrong you want to be able to help – don't overreact!

Things to do together

- Look at the tools which are available to report or block harmful content on the platforms, games and apps that your children are using. **Make sure that they know what to do if they come across unpleasant content – depending on their age it may be more appropriate for them to tell you rather than try and deal with it themselves.**
- **Have a look at the restrictions and tools that are available to provide a safer online experience** – for example YouTube's restricted mode will help to protect your child from unsuitable or inappropriate content. Always remember that no filtering will be 100% safe and even if your child's device is locked down and "safe" they will have a friend with a device which isn't.

10. Sharing images

Many of us share images online and social media in particular is a great way to exchange images with family and friends. Despite some of the negative stories in the media, most young people will share images sensibly and responsibly but there are a few things to bear in mind and discuss with your children.

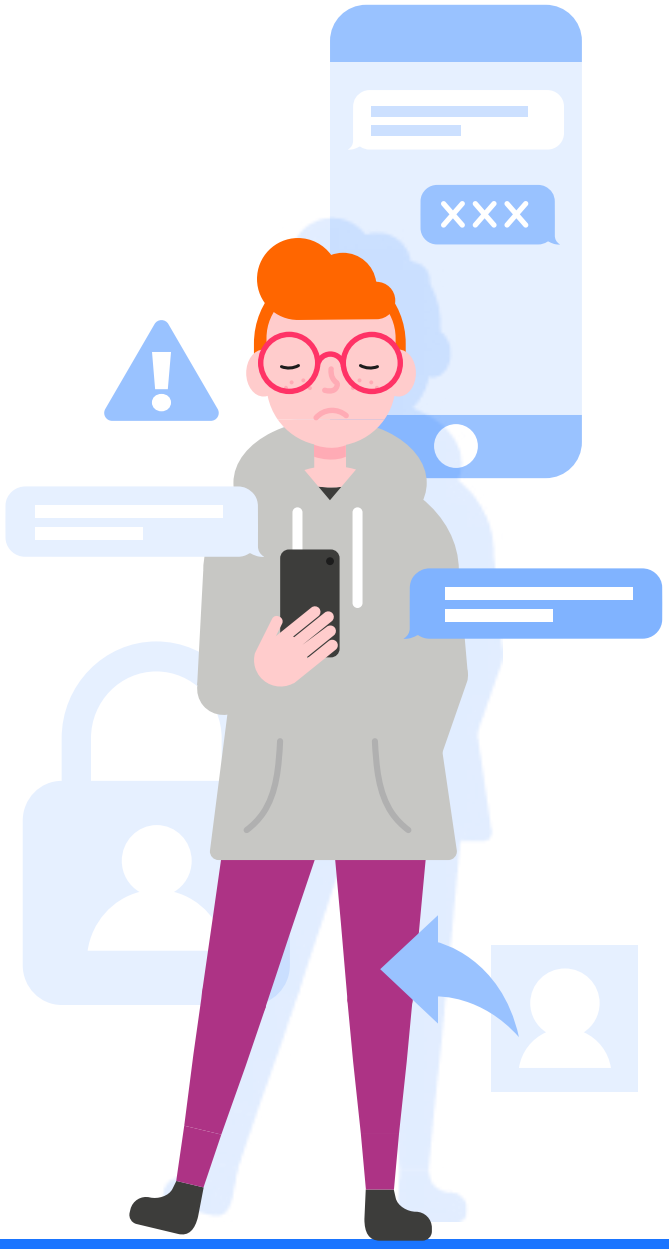
Conversations to have

- When they share an image with friends or post it onto a social media site – do they check that everyone in the image is happy about that? Does it matter? Do they think they need to? Has anyone ever posted an image of them that they weren't happy about? Have you as their parents ever done this? Are they comfortable with you sharing content – do you check with them first? You can find some excellent examples and conversation starters here

- The subject of sexting is often a real worry for parents and contrary to popular belief it's not happening everywhere and not everyone is doing it. Research carried out by Youthworks and Internet Matters found that 4% of 13 year olds and 17% of 15+ children had sent a sexting image to someone else.

- **Don't be afraid to broach the subject with them. Once they are in secondary or senior school you can expect that it will have been discussed in class** – use a story from the media to start a conversation – ask them what they think. Does it happen – do they know people who have done it? Just try and provide an opportunity for an open and honest discussion – you don't need to have all of the answers – it's okay to say that you're not sure and then you can find out together. The sexting advice hub contains a wealth of useful information.

- **Talk about peer pressure** so your child understands that you recognise that they could be pushed into something that they don't feel comfortable with.

Things to do together

- **Have a look at the ZipIt app which helps young people to get "flirty chat back on track".** Have a look at this yourself first – not everyone will think it's a useful tool but it provides alternatives for young people to send when someone else asks them for an image that they don't feel comfortable sharing.