

How to talk to children about potentially harmful online material

Our children live in the adult world when they are online, and whilst we must make their digital world as safe as possible by using parental controls and the correct privacy settings (see [Just Ask Max](#) in The Wellbeing Hub), we must also recognise that we cannot eliminate risk online any more than we can offline.

Instead, we must approach their online life in the same way we would approach the other areas of risk our children must negotiate, such as street safety and navigating friendship. We explore the possible dangers, we give them information and skills, and we explore what to do if something goes wrong. They need us to be calm (when things are going well or badly), reassuring, willing to listen, curious about their world and experiences, and open when exploring possible solutions.

Banning access generally drives behaviour underground, and is not always possible, as we have seen recently with Squid Games – you might have created all the right Netflix parental settings, but they can access scenes via social media sites such as TikTok. Instead, we must engage and explore, and the best way is to ask rather than telling:

- What do you like to watch online?
- Do you think all your friends are really allowed to watch X?
- Why do you think games, films, and shows have age restrictions?
- What do you think might happen if children see things they are too young for?
- What restrictions do you think are a good idea?
- How do you think you would know if you were doing/watching something which wasn't appropriate for your age?
- Do you worry about being left out at school if you haven't been allowed to do/watch something online?
- Do you think some of the films/games you see online turn into games that you play at school?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable playing make-believe games at school?
- What could you do if you did thought a game wasn't right for children your age?
- What would you do if you came across content online which make you feel shocked, sad, or frightened?
- How can I help you stay safe online?

These are conversation openers; they are questions which show your child you are up for a discussion and prepared to learn alongside them. Children will make mistakes in the digital sphere just as they will in the real world. If they know they can talk to us no matter what happens, and that we will work with them to resolve problems, they are more likely to come to us for support. We can only help when we are aware of a problem, so keep the channels of communication open, explain your decisions and stay calm even if you don't feel it.