



## **Staying safe online during the Coronavirus pandemic**

We are in unprecedented times. As schools close and people are confined to their homes due to the global coronavirus pandemic, we are using the internet and online services more now than perhaps ever before. Being online is providing a lifeline for everyone in society from the old to the young, workers and learners, and the vulnerable and curious. This is probably, therefore, a good time to remind ourselves of a few key points to keep safe online.

### **Talking with children and young people about the pandemic**

Children and young people are in the same position as the rest of the population with regards to the Coronavirus – they are confused, eager to understand more about the situation that we are in, and what this might mean for the future; and they will want opportunities to be able to talk about this. Adults should provide opportunities to engage in open and honest conversations about the Coronavirus and how children and young people are feeling about it. One approach could be to take some time out every day to have a discussion – perhaps to discuss the latest developments and then talk about any questions or concerns it raises. There are a number of online guides which contain helpful information about how to have conversations with children and young, such as the resources from:

- ✓ Parent Info <https://parentinfo.org/>
- ✓ Internet Matters <https://www.internetmatters.org/>

### **Give your child a safe space to explore their curiosity online.**

Set parental controls on devices using the internet. Parental controls are the names for a group of settings that put you in control of what content your child can see. Combined with privacy settings these can help you protect your children from the things they shouldn't see or experience online.

The step by step guides on <https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/> will help you to set up the right controls and privacy settings on the networks, gadgets, apps, and sites children use to give them a safer online experience.

### **Talking with children and young people about the about their technology use**

As always, it's important to have open and honest conversations with children and young people about what they are doing online, and especially so at this point in time when they might be making more extensive use of technology. Check in on their technology use regularly – find out about what they are doing online, what new tools and apps they might be using, select tools and content together, and discuss why certain tools and apps might not be appropriate.

Equally, keep the lines of conversation open for children and young people if they have any concerns about anything they might have encountered online; let them know that they can discuss any issues and that you'll find a solution together. As with discussing the Coronavirus situation generally, again it might be useful to find time each day to talk about how things have gone online, and perhaps even to share a couple of more uplifting pieces of content each of you have found or used that day.

### **Embrace the benefits of social media to help us get through difficult times**

Social media will undoubtedly provide an invaluable tool over the coming weeks and months for communicating with friends and family, maintaining social contact while we are required to socially distance ourselves, and for checking that everyone we care about is okay. Seek out opportunities to use the power of social media for good, such as sharing positive messages and building or contributing a sense of community online.

Equally, search out new content that interests or entertains you (being mindful also of its age appropriateness). For example, many public figures and celebrities are trying to keep spirits up by posting short video-clips, or live-streaming music or comedy to keep people entertained, or take part in online quizzes or visit a virtual museum. Many gyms and individuals are offering free access to their online exercise classes that you can do from home – it's important to remain fit and healthy, even if you are unable to exercise outside the home as usual. Or maybe take the opportunity to learn a new skill by attending an online drawing class or similar.

### **Online learning**

The experts are telling us that we shouldn't be trying to recreate a school environment in the home. It will take time for everyone to adjust to these sudden changes in lifestyle. These are difficult times; we need to take things slowly, and not place too much pressure on all members of the family unit. There are, however, some amazing resources that are available for children and young people which can be both entertaining and educational. As a school we are providing home learning tasks for all children.

Three tasks a day is what we recommend. The important thing is to try to develop some sort of routine for children and young people while they are faced with the possibility of weeks or even months at home. For example, try to make a plan for each day which allows time for some online games, school work, reading, watching TV, exercising, and catching up online with friends and relatives. All of these things are important, and tech clearly has a role to play but be sure to factor in plenty of off-tech activities too. We have a recommended timetable which you may find useful. (<https://www.clophillstmarysschool.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/daily-timetable-final.pdf>)

### **Be mindful of online contacts and connections**

Clearly social media platforms provide an excellent way to keep in touch; something which is vital given the fact that so many of us are having to socially distance ourselves for the foreseeable future. It is worth reiterating, however, that social media can also open up the possibility of communicating with strangers. Children should remember that they can never fully be aware of who they are talking to online, and that they are free to shut down any conversations which make them feel uncomfortable in any way. As with general online safety advice, children should talk to their parent or carer if this is the case.

### **Choose your tools carefully**

Now that many children (and parents) are staying at home, there will inevitably be a rise in the amount of time spent online and a wide range of social media platforms will be used. If children and young people suddenly find themselves with more time on their hands, they may well decide to experiment with new social media platforms. Parents should remember that many of these sites have age restrictions and it is important to understand the type of content that users might be exposed to. Remind yourself of how the privacy settings work on particular sites and of how to report a problem if you have. Useful information on lots of the popular apps and platforms can be found in the BIK Guide to online services <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/web/portal/onlineservices>

### **Keep personal information private**

Similarly it is important to think carefully about any personal information that might be shared – given many of us will be confined to our homes, boredom could set in and people could find they are lower their guard with regards to social media, perhaps sharing more personal information than they would normally, or taking less care of identifying factors which might be in the background of a photo or livestream.

### **Think before you share**

It's an old mantra, but one that's so important in the current situation. People are naturally concerned by the events across the globe and there is a huge amount of content online and on social media which

is talking about Coronavirus and the impact it is having. It is easy to be shocked or scared by something that you see, but equally it's important to verify that the content being shared is genuine. There have already been several examples of online hoaxes – for example, the Haarlem Aldi hoax appeared last week showing video footage of people panic-buying from a supermarket in the Netherlands. Bellingcat, the investigative journalism website, proved that the video was actually from 2011 and showed a supermarket in Kiel in Germany which was having a sale.

It is easy to use these times to whip up fear and concern, but this must be avoided. The internet is a great place to keep up to date with the latest developments but, for reliable information relating to the virus and what is happening, official websites are the way to go – for example, the World Health Organization (WHO) provides regularly updated advice for the public, as are many national governments. It's equally important not to repost or share anything unless you're able to validate the source and the fact that it is reliable.

### **Scams**

Sadly there are some who are seeking to exploit the Coronavirus situation by creating online scams which could catch us out. Remember that if someone looks too good to be true, then it probably is. Emails which try and suggest that you need to take urgent action can appear legitimate, but it's always worth taking a breath and stepping back to think whether it is genuine. Never be afraid to question what you are reading and remember that governments and health authorities are very unlikely to use unsolicited phone calls, emails or texts to ask you to share information. Make sure that children and young people are mindful of online scams too in the content and services they are using.

### **Sources of additional support and advice**

As is often the case with a crisis, challenging times can bring out the best and the worst in people but let's try and focus on the positives. Dialogue and discussion is the most important thing in all of this – we have to keep talking to each other, whether virtually or face-to-face!

And, as always with challenges related to technology use, you are not alone. The network of Safer Internet Centres are dedicated to keeping children and young people safe online, and supporting those that care for them. Check out your national Safer Internet Centre profile page for contact information and links to national websites for sources of localised information and support, including helpline services which can help you respond to any specific online challenges.

<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/>