

Supporting LGBTQ+ children and young people online

Advice for parents and carers to help LGBTQ+ children and young people stay safe online.



Connecting & Sharing

For LGBTQ+ children and young people, connecting and sharing online can be a vital way to interact with peers, educate themselves and find solutions to issues that friends or family may not understand. However, there are also areas of risk for young people within the LGBTQ+ community when interacting online.

What you need to know

Life on social media is an important part of growing up today, and for LGBTQ+ children and young people, it can often be a lifeline. Connections are really helpful for those who want to educate themselves on their gender identity or their sexual or romantic orientation or discover friends and connections who are in the same position. It can also be a way to affirm they are not alone and there are other people thinking about the same things they are.

The benefits

There are many benefits for LGBTQ+ children and young people in forging relationships within online communities including:

- **Building relationships with others in the LGBTQ+ community**, especially if there are few others in their lives who identify as LGBTQ+
- **Educating themselves** about aspects of growing up LGBTQ+
- **Finding a community** of people with similar experiences
- **Expressing themselves** through all kinds of ways that they may not get to do offline
- **Exploring online dating and relationships** - LGBTQ+ young people can meet online and share and discuss experiences with other LGBTQ+ people. Being able to build meaningful connections with others with similar experiences is a major selling point for online dating for those in the LGBTQ+ community, where they can be themselves free from the potential judgement of others

The risks

We know that there are risks and challenges that go hand in hand with the benefits of existing in online spaces. These can include:

- **Being exposed to dangerous, hateful, or inappropriate content online** about the LGBTQ+ community including anti-LGBTQ+ messaging such as hate speech, or even paid-for advertisements for things such as conversion therapy or anti-LGBTQ+ groups
- **Exposure to pornography** is another risk. This could be pornographic content online or shared between two specific individuals. This could stand to impact your child's view of sex and exploring their sexuality, as well as potentially endangering themselves should they feel pressured to take part in similar activities
- **Connecting with potentially dangerous individuals**, including using online dating apps that may not be age-appropriate.
- **Being a victim of online sexual harassment** - unwanted sexual behaviour online. Everyone is at risk of this, but for LGBTQ+ children and young people, their sexual orientation and/or gender could be the reason they are targeted
- **Meeting people in person that they have only engaged with online**, especially within the context of online dating, could put them in danger of sexual harassment or physical assault offline - [Research from The Brook](#) revealed that significantly more gay young people (**9.9%**) had met up with an online contact who was not who they said they were, compared to straight young people (**4.9%**)

Being a victim of grooming and sexual exploitation

- all children and young people are vulnerable to these risks including the LGBTQ+ community. Some LGBTQ+ children and young people deliberately use adult sites because they think it's an easier way to meet people, explore their sexuality, or feel accepted. Also, an adult dating app might be the only online space they know of specifically for LGBTQ+ people – if they don't have access to an LGBTQ+ youth group or a moderated forum run by trained professionals

The threat of being exposed to dangerous or harmful hate speech online increases exponentially for transgender people, with [1.5 million transphobic tweets](#) published over the course of a three and a half year period. With the threat of witnessing hate speech comes the added threat of transphobic cyberbullying (*bullying based on prejudice or negative attitudes, views, or beliefs about trans people*). A culture of transphobia online can mean some people feel emboldened to harass, bully or discriminate against trans people, so young trans people might be especially at risk of transphobic cyberbullying. This can potentially have harmful effects on mental wellbeing and self-image.

It is important to be aware that:

- LGBTQ+ children and young people are more likely to be on the receiving end of cyberbullying due to their sexuality or gender identity. [3 in 10 LGBT young people](#) have been bullied with comments, messages, videos, or pictures that were mean, untrue, secret, or embarrassing
- Although witnessing LGBTQ+ hate speech online was found to be [eight times less likely](#) than witnessing general conversations about sexual and gender identity, it is still relatively common
- [According to Stonewall - The School Report \(2017\)](#), **2 in 5** LGBT young people (40 per cent) have been the target of homophobic, biphobia and transphobic abuse online
- However, **many LGBTQ+ children and young people come out online before coming out offline** and may build a community with people they only know online before they are able to build a community of LGBTQ+ friends offline. Cutting them off from a valuable resource could discourage them from coming out to peers and friends offline

The challenges

The primary challenge for all parents is to work out how your child can enjoy the benefits of social media and connecting online, whilst protecting them from the risks that may lead to harm. This is especially important for children and young people exploring their sexuality because of the additional challenges that you may come across. These can include:

- **The importance of social media in maintaining relationships**

- Internet and social media use are a fundamental aspect of the lives of children and young people today and limiting this could impact their relationships with school friends, long-distance friendships, and other relationships that exist primarily offline. This is even more important following recent events of lockdowns due to Coronavirus where young people might be restricted from seeing friends on a regular basis

- **Vital roles of online resources and groups to support wellbeing**

- Limiting access to the internet could cut them off from precious resources that would allow them to explore and express who they are
- Being part of a community with other LGBTQ+ people may be really important to a young person, so they need to be supported to understand how to make friends and connections online in a safe way
- They may feel that the benefits of using it outweigh the risks or be aware of the risks but do not want to lose what they have gained

Things to consider

There are a few things to consider when approaching your child about their internet use, and when taking steps to protect their wellbeing:

- **Know the risks** it could help you to identify any risky situations they may be taking part in unknowingly
- **Have open and honest conversations** with children and young people about life online – for example, asking them what they think about any news stories relating to apps or new technologies, ask them to tell you about their favourite app
- **Be aware of what your child is using the internet for** and who they are connecting with
- Equally, understand that the internet is a part of growing up now, and you should **respect their right to use it** and their right to privacy. Make sure to **work together to build their resilience and trust** to ensure they make safer choices online and can cope with potential online risks
- Understand that **banning technology and internet use is not feasible**. It has a far greater positive impact than a negative one
- **Know what the law says** - Although not all harmful online behaviour is illegal, every act of discrimination against LGBTQ+ children and young people should be challenged. If you are concerned about an incident that has happened online, you can go through your local safeguarding body using your child's school referral process. Reports to the police are done alongside a referral to children's social care. For more insight on what the law say see [Stonewall's guide](#)

Practical steps to help your child:

Social media has become a part of growing up. Although there are many clear benefits to connecting and sharing with others online, especially for minority groups of children and young people, there are some things that can be done to protect them from the risks outlined in this resource.

Opening a conversation with them about social media use is the best way to start communicating about what they should be aware of, what you expect from each other to help them stay safe online.

Conversations to have

- **Start the discussion in a casual way** - sitting down with them for a formal discussion is something they will associate with a punishment or serious news
- **Ask them about what they use social media for**, what they like about it, and who they connect with - giving them a chance to be open first is much better than simply telling them what you think
- **Ask them if they see anything on social media that makes them uncomfortable** - they might not be honest, but their reaction will help you to gauge if they are interacting with or witnessing anything on social media that is affecting them offline as well
- **Talk to them about the dangers of oversharing on social media** - it's very common for young people to come out online first. As such, they may have been a part of online communities that share LGBTQ+ experiences before you knew. Nevertheless, oversharing in a community of people they've never met before can still be dangerous, regardless of how long they have been a part of it. For example, disclosing identifying information that could help somebody to find them in real life

- **Allow them to voice their feelings** - it's important that your child feels listened to when discussing their social media use, as it may be one of the largest parts of their lives

Things to remember

- **Stay calm** - there is a chance they may get defensive or angry when discussing this subject, particularly if they have been taking part in an activity that you now feel the need to limit. Remember to stay calm and talk to them in an age appropriate way
- **Remind them** - you are not completely cutting them off from technology or the internet, just limiting or monitoring activity
- **Let them be a part of it** - ask them to help with the next steps. If they are being honest with you about their activity, then inviting them to take part in creating the boundaries will help them see it's for good, and this isn't happening as a punishment
- **Social media is a big part of life - for LGBTQ+** children and young people, social media can often be a lifeline to find a community and is often the place they come out first. Restricting access to social media could severely impact their ability to come out offline and talk openly with others about their sexuality



Visit: www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety