

Talking with **Children** about **Online Safety**




Barnardos
Online Safety
Programme

A Quick Guide for
Parents & Carers

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

Children's lives today include online spaces as well as offline ones. They use the internet to learn, socialise, play, create and relax. This brings opportunities for creativity, learning and connection, but it can also bring challenges.

Every child and family is different. There is no single 'right way' to approach online life. What matters is finding approaches that work for your child, your relationship, and your family context.

This guide supports parents and carers to talk with children about online life in calm, everyday ways. It draws on findings from Barnardos' published research "Parent and Carer Involvement in the Online World of Children (2025)", alongside Barnardos' practice experience supporting families in our online safety programme.

This is not a technical guide, and it does not aim to cover every app or platform. Its focus is on **conversation, relationships and trust**, which research consistently shows are central to children's online safety and wellbeing.

For full findings, statistics and methodology, see the accompanying Barnardos report [here](#).

WHAT THE RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Barnardos' research points to several consistent patterns:

Children are generally willing to talk about online life, particularly when adults respond calmly and with interest.

Children often want more support with complex areas such as understanding what is real or fake online, managing wellbeing, and navigating online interactions.

Children are more comfortable sharing positive online experiences than negative or upsetting ones.

When adults react with anger or punishment, children may be less likely to seek help in future

Many children value parental involvement, but want it to feel fair, respectful and proportionate.

These findings underline the importance of how conversations happen, not just what is discussed.

WHY CONVERSATIONS MATTER

Online safety is not only about settings, rules or controls. It is also about whether a child feels able to speak to a trusted adult when something is confusing, worrying or goes wrong.

Research and practice both show that children are more likely to seek support when adults:

Listen first

Stay calm

Explain decisions

Avoid judgement

Focus on problem solving together



A supportive relationship is one of the strongest protective factors children have online.

HOW TO CREATE A SUPPORTIVE CONVERSATION



Simple approaches make a difference.

Choose the right moment

- Pick a time that feels relaxed.
- Avoid starting difficult conversations when everyone is tired or rushed.
- Short, everyday chats are often more effective than one long discussion.

Set a calm tone

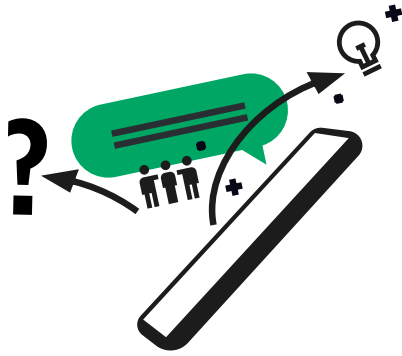
- Sit alongside your child rather than face to face.
- Keep your tone neutral and interested.
- Let your child know they are not in trouble for being honest.

Listen before responding

- Give your child time to explain.
- Avoid interrupting or jumping to solutions.
- Acknowledge their feelings, even if you are worried.

Focus on understanding

- Ask open questions such as:
 - “How are things online for you at the moment?”
 - “Was anything confusing or annoying today?”
- Show interest in what they enjoy online as well as what concerns you.



FIVE AREAS TO TALK ABOUT REGULARLY

1. Content – What children see online

Children may come across upsetting, confusing or misleading content, sometimes without looking for it. Sometimes content can become more intense or worrying over time, even if a child did not actively look for it.

Helpful approaches include:

Asking what they enjoy watching or playing

Checking whether anything has made them uncomfortable

Helping them understand how to hide, mute or report content

Talking about how recommendations and algorithms work

Children may need support understanding that some images, videos or messages online may be edited, misleading or generated using AI

AI-generated content can sometimes look very convincing even when it is inaccurate or entirely fictional.

How platforms shape what children see

Many apps and platforms are designed in a way that keeps users watching or scrolling for as long as possible. They do this using features such as:

- Recommendation algorithms (suggesting similar or more extreme content)
- Autoplay (automatically playing the next video)
- Infinite scroll (no clear stopping point)
- Notifications that draw users back in

This means what a child sees online is not random. It is often shaped by what they watch, like or pause on.

Helpful ways to explore this with your child include:

Explaining that platforms are designed to hold attention, not always to show what is most helpful or appropriate

Noticing together how content can change over time

Asking simple questions like: “why do you think this showed up?” And “how does this make you feel?”

Show them how to:

Hide or mark content as “not interested”

Reset or refresh recommendations

Turn off autoplay (where possible)

Take breaks when scrolling is hard to stop

The key message is that children can have some control over their online environment, and they do not have to manage this alone.



2. Contact – Who children interact with

Online interactions can include friends, classmates and people they do not know offline.

Conversations can focus on:

- Who it is okay to chat with
- How to recognise uncomfortable or unwanted contact
- What to do if someone behaves inappropriately
- When and how to block or report
- Understanding that some people or messages online may try to trick or pressure users into sharing information, images or money

Children benefit from clear reassurance that they do not have to manage these situations alone.

3. Conduct – how people behave online

Online spaces can feel fast moving, particularly group chats or multiplayer games. Misunderstandings and conflict can happen quickly.

It helps to talk about:

- ▶ Being respectful online
- ▶ What to do if a mistake is made
- ▶ How messages can be misread
- ▶ How to step away from tense situations

Mistakes should be treated as learning opportunities, not reasons for punishment.



4. Context – pressure, pace and wellbeing

Children often experience pressure to respond quickly, stay connected, or keep up with online activity.

Supportive conversations include:

- Noticing how online activity affects mood and energy
- Recognising when it might be time for a break
- Agreeing routines that support sleep, school and family time
- Acknowledging that some online activities cannot be paused instantly
- Recognising that some features are designed in a way that makes it difficult to stop, which can affect sleep, mood and concentration

These discussions are most effective when adults reflect on their own online habits too.

5. Contract – boundaries, privacy and agreements

Clear, shared expectations reduce conflict and uncertainty.

Families may find it helpful to agree together:

- When and where devices are used
- Expectations around privacy and respect
- How new apps or games are introduced
- What happens if something goes wrong online
- How money, purchases and personal information are handled online

Writing these agreements down in a **Family Digital Agreement** can support consistency and review as children grow.

Conversations may also include:

- In-app purchases and spending money in games or apps
- Requests for money, gift cards, gaming currency or personal information
- Understanding how apps collect, use and share information

When something goes wrong

Children are more likely to seek help when they know they will be met with support rather than blame.

A calm first response matters. Helpful responses include:

- Thanking your child for telling you
- Reassuring them they are not in trouble
- Focusing on what to do next together

Practical steps may include:

- Not replying immediately
- Saving evidence
- Blocking or reporting where appropriate
- Seeking additional support if needed

Follow up conversations, once things have settled, help children feel supported and understood.



Keeping conversations going

Children consistently say they prefer regular, low pressure conversations rather than formal talks.

Simple prompts can help:

“Did anything online make you laugh today?”

“Was there anything that didn’t make sense?”

“Is there anything you’d like help with online at the moment?”

Checking in regularly builds trust over time.

A note on parental controls

Tools and settings can be useful, particularly for younger children. Research and practice suggest they work best when:

Children understand why they are being used

Decisions are explained and reviewed together

Controls are adjusted as children develop

Controls are most effective when combined with open communication.

What matters most

You do not need to know every app, trend or setting to support your child online.

What matters most is supporting children to develop the confidence, skills and relationships they need to navigate online spaces over time:

A calm, trusting relationship

Clear, consistent boundaries

Openness to listening and learning together

This guide is intended to support those everyday conversations.

For detailed findings and evidence, see the accompanying Barnardos report.

Further support

Information on Barnardos’ online safety programmes and additional resources is available via Barnardos channels.

Optional tools to support these conversations, including a Family Digital Agreement and a Parent Checklist, are included as appendices.

APPENDIX A: QUICK PARENT CHECKLIST

This checklist pulls together the *key steps* from the guide into one quick reference.

You don't have to do everything at once — even one or two changes can make a difference.

1. Strengthen privacy & security

Privacy settings checked

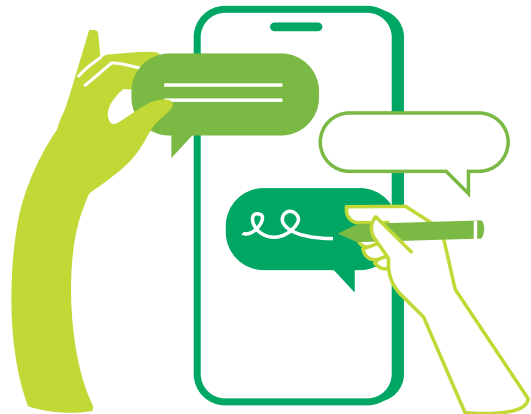
- ☐ All accounts set to private
- ☐ Only friends can message, follow or comment
- ☐ Collaborations limited to friends
- ☐ Comment filters on (where available)

Passwords & login safety:

- ☐ Strong passwords (not reused)
- ☐ Stored safely
- ☐ Two-factor authentication on (if available)

Location settings:

- ☐ Location sharing off on all apps
- ☐ Snap Map set to Ghost Mode
- ☐ No location tagging in posts or stories



2. Reduce contact risks

- ☐ Friends/followers reviewed together
- ☐ Unknown or inactive accounts removed
- ☐ Game chat set to friends only
- ☐ Child knows how to block & report
- ☐ Child knows key red flags: secrecy, flattery, pressure, requests for photos

3. Support digital wellbeing

- Devices kept out of bedrooms at night
- Daily agreed offline times (meals, homework, family time)
- Notifications reduced
- Child can notice when scrolling feels “too much”
- Adults show healthy phone habits



4. Build media literacy & critical thinking

- You have talked about “STOP, THINK, CHECK”
- You watched some online content together and discussed it
- Child understands deepfakes and AI-generated content
- Child knows that not everything online is true
- Conversations about body image and filters started
- Talked about why certain content is suggested (e.g. to keep attention or promote products)



5. Protect against harmful content

- SafeSearch enabled
- Restricted Mode on (YouTube, TikTok etc.)
- Age-appropriate game content filters set
- Autoplay turned off where possible or discussed with your child
- Reviewed and adjusted content feeds together (e.g. using “not interested”, resetting recommendations)
- Child knows they’re never in trouble for telling you about upsetting content

6. Communicate early, often & calmly

- Reassured your child their phone won’t be taken away for being honest
- Had at least one casual chat this week (car, walk, dinner)
- Asked open-ended questions (“Seen anything odd online lately?”)
- Identified 5 trusted adults your child can talk to
- Practised simple scripts for tricky situations (“No thanks”, “I have to go”)



7. Be ready for when something goes wrong

- Child knows the 4-step plan:
 1. Don't reply
 2. Save evidence
 3. Tell a trusted adult
 4. Block & report
- You know how to screenshot on their device
- You know where and when to report concerns (platform reporting tools, school, Hotline.ie or Gardaí where appropriate).
- You feel prepared to stay calm and solution focused

8. Review regularly

- Family Digital Agreement reviewed every 2-3 months
- New apps/features discussed
- Screen time habits reassessed together
- Child invited to share what's working and what isn't



APPENDIX B: FAMILY DIGITAL AGREEMENT

The Family Digital Agreement below is designed to help families put these conversations into practice.

Complete this guide together as a family or with your child and review and adapt it as your child grows.

Child's Name:

.....

Parent/Carer:

.....

Date:

.....

(To be completed by parent/carers and child together)

1. Device Use & Screen Time

We agree that:

- Devices will not be used in bedrooms overnight.
- Devices will have a daily switch off time of:
- Devices will not be used before school unless agreed.
- We can take a break if scrolling or gaming feels hard to stop, and support each other to step away
- We will have daily screen free times, such as: Mealtimes, Family time, Homework time, Activities / sports

Optional extras:

- Use an alarm clock instead of a phone
- No devices during family outings or visits
- No headphones after a certain time

2. Apps, Games & Social Media

We agree that:

- New apps or games need parent/carer permission.
- We will check age ratings together before installing anything.
- Social media access will take account of both platform age requirements and a child's readiness.
- Accounts must stay private, and requests will only be accepted from people known in real life.
- We will regularly review what is showing up in feeds together and use tools like "not interested" or reset options to shape content
- In-app purchases must always be approved by a parent/carer.
- We will be cautious about offers, prizes, discounts or requests for money online.

Optional extras:

- Parent/carer will explore new games or apps together with the child
- Review friends/followers regularly

3. Privacy & Safety Settings

We agree that:

- Keep location services turned off unless needed for safety.
- Use strong passwords and keep them private (except with a parent/carer).
- Keep accounts private and avoid sharing personal details like school, address or routine.
- Tell a trusted adult if anything online feels weird, confusing or uncomfortable.

4. Communication & Behaviour Online

We agree that:

- We will be kind online, just as we are offline.
- We will not take part in teasing, exclusion or sharing private screenshots.
- If someone is unkind, we will: Not reply, save evidence, tell an adult, block & report.
- We will think before we post: "Is it true?", "Is it kind?", "Would I say it face to face?".

5. Asking for Help

We agree that:

- The child will not get in trouble for telling a parent/carer if something goes wrong.
- Devices will not be removed as punishment for seeking help.
- We will solve problems together, calmly.
- Other trusted adults the child can speak to include:

6. Parental Responsibilities

Parents/carers agree to:

- Be good role models with their own device use.
- Check devices openly and respectfully, not secretly.
- Learn about the platforms the child uses.
- Explain concerns calmly and work on solutions together.
- Review this agreement regularly.

7. When We Break the Agreement

Instead of punishments, we agree to:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| • Talk about what happened | • Decide what support or change might help |
| • Review the rule | • Keep communication open |

Mistakes are learning opportunities.

8. Review Date

We will review this agreement on: _____
(e.g., every 3 months)

Signatures Child: _____

Parent / Carer: _____ Date: _____

About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960's, Barnardos works with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support.

Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction.

Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential, regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – **Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.**



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