

# Supporting children and young people with SEND online

Advice for parents and carers to help children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) stay safe online.



## Staying Safe While Browsing Online

The internet is a game-changer for all children and young people (CYP). With information at their fingertips, it allows them to broaden their ideas, discover new passions, and expand their knowledge. While it can be a force for good, it can also be a place where CYP stumble upon inappropriate content that can harm their wellbeing.

### What you need to know

How is browsing online different for CYP with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?

### The benefits

As websites become more accessible to cater for different disabilities, this can empower CYP by helping them build confidence and self-esteem. It can also:

- Removes barriers to the world
- Allow them to discover interests and improve their skills
- Support learning
- Support development - cognitive, emotional, social, learning and motor skills

### The risks

Any child, from any background can be at risk of the following risks online. But some are more vulnerable than others:

- **Online abuse** – this can include sexual or emotional abuse
- **Coercion** – Being enticed to send nude photos with sometimes the lure of gifts, tokens or money
- **Inappropriate content** – this can include sexual, violent or harmful content. CYP with SEND are also more likely to see content that promotes self-harm and suicide

- **Fake news and misinformation** – an [Ofcom](#) study found that 12-15 years old overall, saw social media as the least trustworthy source of news (39%)
- **Cyberbullying** – this can include direct hate/negative speech of the CYP, exclusion from group chats, not liking a photo or status, etc. CYP with vulnerabilities have **three times more likely** to be exposed to hate speech and content promoting self-harm and suicide than CYP without vulnerabilities

*It is important to be aware that:*

- CYP with SEND are **more likely** to experience all online risks compared to those without any difficulties
- Out of the different types of risks, CYP with SEND are **significantly more likely** to experience contact risks online. Examples of this include sexting under pressure and coercion. They appear to be preyed upon and singled out
- CYP with **communication difficulties** are also **more likely to experience contact risks**. They are more likely to spend time in chat rooms than their non-vulnerable peers which can facilitate direct communication and are known for explicit sexual talk, innuendos, and obscene language.
- Experiencing **contact risks is also associated with a greater risk of seeing harmful content** and experiencing more aggressive behaviour from others online

## The challenges

[Research](#) has also shown that parents of CYP with SEND also have a greater fear of extremist recruitment than parents of non-SEND CYP which may suggest anxiety about their children's isolation and gullibility.

While there is this fear that CYP may be more at risk because of their vulnerability, parents agree that the benefits outweigh the risks when it comes to what the online world can offer those with SEND.

## Things to consider

Here are a few things to think about to support CYP:

- Prepare them for what they might see
- Don't just consider age limits but their level of maturity as well
- Check-in regularly about what they do online

## Practical steps to protect CYP

- [Create a digital family agreement](#) – set boundaries on how CYP interact online and what sites and apps they use
- [Set up tech safely](#) – as a parent or carer of a CYP with additional needs, having greater visibility and supervision can be extremely helpful to reassure you your child is doing fine
- Find out the kind of things your child likes to do online and agree on which websites and apps are the best for them to use
- [Use safety filters](#) available on the sites they use and block pop-ups to stop them seeing ads that may have inappropriate content
- Switch on Google SafeSearch and turn on YouTube restricted mode to make sure they see age-appropriate search results
- Ensure CYP know that they should [report abusive or inappropriate content on the social platform](#) and block anyone that may be saying hurtful things
- [Do things together](#) with your child can be beneficial, as it can help you equip your child young with the know-how and the skills to connect safely with others online



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