Supporting LGBTQ+ children and young people online

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

Staying Safe While Browsing Online

All young people, including those who are LGBTQ+ and those who are not, should be supported to browse the internet safely – there are inherent risks for all young people, and for LGBTQ young people these can include exposure to inappropriate content or bad advice around exploring their sexual orientation and identity.

What you need to know

The internet is incredibly important for LGBTQ+ children and young people to connect with who they are and explore this side of their identity. As suggested, they are at no greater risk than any other children or young person when using the internet for browsing, but some of their browsing behaviour may expose them to potential risks that could be dangerous.

The benefits

Alongside the obvious benefits that browsing the internet offers to all children and young people, there are some specific benefits that can help to empower an LGBTQ+ child or young person, including:

- Access to LGBTQ+ specific websites and news outlets that report on many positive news stories relating to being LGBTQ+ from around the world, something that mainstream news outlets often do not show

- Access to support communities and advice that could help them to navigate early relationships, come out to friends and relatives and remain safe

- Understanding and engaging in online campaigning that will help them develop a sense of community with like-minded people and their awareness of issues that affect them

- Being able to explore more generally their interests and what makes them who they are outside of their sexual or romantic orientation or their gender identity

The risks

As with any activity online, unsupervised and unrestricted browsing online does come with risks for any child or young person. However, for a LGBTQ+ child or young person, there are some specific issues that could arise including:

- **Reading news stories from around the world that report on anti-LGBTQ+ issues.** Whilst it is important for your child or young person to engage with current affairs, reading information about anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns or policy could start to impact their long-term confidence and feelings of safety

- **Seeking out or coming across pornography.** Due to a lack of LGBTQ+ sex education in schools, a lot of teens and young people within the community turn to the internet to educate themselves on how to navigate sex and relationships. This could result in them seeing inappropriate content that could impact their view of sex and relationships in the future, their body image, and self-esteem

- **Exposing themselves to potentially harmful advice or support on specific topics.** There is a lot of information out there, but many children and young people may not be able to discern the fact from fiction and good advice from advice that could be harmful to them. LGBTQ+ children and young people are more likely to use the internet to find answers to specific questions, especially if they do not have access to a community offline. As such, they are at a greater risk of exposing themselves to more harmful content

- **Engaging with resources on conversion therapy.** Even though the UK has recently acted to ban all conversion therapy practices, there is still a lot of information online regarding gay conversion therapy. As such, LGBTQ+ children and young people have been known to seek out a 'cure' for their sexuality, especially if they lack a support community offline. These resources are extremely dangerous, often advocating for dangerous or untested medications and self-harm as a means of 'curing' sexuality

It is important to be aware that:

- Although LGBTQ+ children and young people are no more at risk from browsing the internet as any other child or young person, their browsing habits might be different, and in that lies the risk

- Browsing the internet is a useful tool, and LGBTQ+ children and young people are likely to use it to explore key parts of their sexual or gender identity, as well as to identify a community they can feel a part of

The challenges

Giving children and young people the space to thrive online while managing potential risks they face can be more challenging as they become more active online. Other challenges include:

- **Allowing your child or young person to explore aspects of their sexuality** and stay in touch with who they are is an extremely important area of internet use for LGBTQ+ children and young people. Cutting this off could impact their ability to understand their sexuality, something that many LGBTQ+ children and young people struggle with

- **There may be some cultural or religious expectations on your child** from their school environment, in the home, or within the community in which you live. As such, they may have developed beliefs that conflict with their sexual orientation. There are faith groups that are open and accepting of LGBTQ+ people and it's important that they know where they can find these groups. More information can be found **here**

- **Helping them understand fact from fiction** and the dangers of fake news and inappropriate advice can be a difficult task, especially when so much of it is hard for even the most educated of adults to understand

- **Pornography and the sexualisation of LGBTQ+** people can be a difficult topic for anyone to talk about and opening this discussion with your child could be an uncomfortable situation

- It is **not feasible to cut them off from technology** and browsing altogether, given the volume of schoolwork that involves internet access

Things to consider

Opening the conversation on some of the potential areas of risk is important, in order to make sure you are both on the same page, but it is important to strike a balance between **making them aware of the dangers without scaring them off using the internet to explore who they are.**

Conversations to have:

Pornography
Obviously, this might be an uncomfortable topic for you to approach with your child, and **one that should be tackled in an age-appropriate way**. If your child is younger, this might not even be something that you feel is necessary to cover, but for teenagers, this is something they are much more likely to be exposed to. There are some things to consider when opening the conversation on this topic, including:

- **Try not to feel too awkward.** We appreciate this is easier said than done, but if you are obviously uncomfortable during discussions of sex and exploring sexuality, this attitude is something that your child is likely to absorb

- **Remember, it is not a bad thing for your child to explore** this side of themselves (providing they are of legal age), and if you are visibly awkward, this could impact their view of sex and relationships in the future

- **Don't be accusatory.** You are not accusing them of looking at pornography or of doing anything wrong, but rather opening the conversation so they feel they can talk to you about anything they have seen that makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe

- **Understand why your child has accessed porn** and think about how they can support them to meet that need in a healthier way. For example, if they're curious about what sex involves, are there age-appropriate and factually correct resources they can look at to help answer their questions? If they feel pressured by age peers because 'everybody's doing it', have a conversation with them about how it's normal to feel those pressures but important to respect their own and others' boundaries and the law

Fake news and bad advice
Fake news can be difficult for anyone to navigate, especially for minority groups. This is because they are often the subject of fake news, and it can leave them and those in their lives vulnerable to believing lies about themselves or their loved ones. Not only is fake news an issue, but there is a lot of useless or harmful advice on the internet that those who are not well educated in that particular area might decide to follow.

- Educate yourself. Make sure you know how to **spot fake news**, and teach them the signs

- Discuss with them what kind of things they are browsing the internet for and try to understand what problems they might be trying to solve with it

- Identify with them the kind of support or advice that comes from reliable sources, and where to find these sources. For example, try to discourage them from finding advice on sites like Reddit or other similar forums as they are not moderated and can often contain potentially harmful advice

Things to remember

LGBTQ+ world issues

Even in 2020, there are still many places in the world that are not accepting of LGBTQ+ people, and often this finds its way into the headlines. **Having an open discussion with your child** about this is important in order to ensure they feel safe and are aware of measures they may need to take when interacting with people from different cultures. Key things to think about before having this conversation with them include:

- **The aim is not to scare them.** Despite advances in LGBTQ+ rights, the world can still be a difficult place for these children and young people. Talking about news items that are upsetting might be a difficult job and scaring them into feeling they are unable to express themselves is not the goal but could be a by-product of this conversation

- Instead of talking about all the horrible things that LGBTQ+ have experienced around the world, **try to discuss how far rights have come,** and that whilst some places still have far to go, they should not feel unsafe to express themselves

- **Ensure they are aware of the difficulties facing LGBTQ+** people in your country, and any measures they could take to protect themselves from harm, both online and offline. This might be a scary topic for you to discuss with them as well, as their wellbeing is your priority, but it's important to stay calm and honest with them. Go through their schools anti-bullying policy with them, discuss the legislation in place to protect LGBTQ+ people in your country, and ensure they understand where they can go for help in different challenging situations

Conversion therapy

Alongside other LGBTQ+ human rights issues around the world, conversion therapy is something that often makes headlines. Although it has been banned in a lot of countries (not in the UK), it is still practiced in many countries and across many states in the US.. **Stonewall's LGBT in Britain report** on health found that one in twenty of LGBT people have been pressured to access services to question or change their sexual orientation when accessing healthcare services.

- It is important to make them feel safe. Ensure they feel they can come to you for issues related to their sexual identity. Often, LGBTQ+ children and young people who do not feel accepted offline will seek out potentially harmful resources on conversion therapy in a bid to attempt to **'cure' themselves of their sexuality**

- Make it clear there is nothing wrong with them. Building an LGBTQ+-inclusive home environment and making sure they know they are supported, loved and accepted just as they are. This may make them more resilient and understand their sexual orientation or their gender identity does not need to be 'cured'

Practical steps to help your child:

If your child comes across something that upsets them online, here are some important things to remember on **how to deal with these issues:**

- **Ask them how they came across** the content that upset or concerned them - did they look for it to try to educate themselves in a specific area? Did they happen upon it? Was it a pop-up ad?

- **Ask them what kind of content it was** - was it hate speech, pornography, something that concerned them from across the world?

- **Talk to them about how it made them feel** - were they scared by it? Traumatised? Do they have questions about what they saw or read?

- **Reassure them that this is not something they are in trouble for,** and that you are just there to make sure they are ok. If they think they are in trouble, it could result in them being secretive about their behaviours online in the future

- If they feel like talking to you is not the best option, **point them in the direction of other support they can get** - other family members, family friends, their school, or expert organisations such as Childline

- Review **parental controls** with your child and assess what, if any, need to be stricter

- Tell them that, even though going online is useful and part of life, it is ok to feel the need to take a break away from internet use

- If they are concerned about some **pornography** they have seen, it is important to understand what it was and the severity of it. Even though this will be a difficult and uncomfortable conversation to have, you need to know this to go forward in dealing with any harm they have come across

- If you feel that their wellbeing or mental health is at risk from online harms, **consider discussing it with a GP**, or point your child in the direction of additional support from organisations such as Young Minds

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