

## Online risk: myths and facts

The internet is a wonderful resource for young people and offers unprecedented opportunities for connecting and learning. But it can also be scary. Many parents are afraid their children will be exposed to upsetting content or meet dangerous people online. What are the facts about online risk?

### Risk vs harm

First, it's important to know the difference between risk and harm. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but there is a clear distinction. When we talk about risk, we mean the *possibility* that something negative or dangerous will happen. Harm, of course, refers to actual damage or trauma.

A lot of our conversations about keeping kids safe online confuse the two. There are certainly risks associated with internet use, but for the majority of young people these risks will never lead to harm. A 2014 survey by EU Kids Online, for instance, found that though children are indeed exposed to some risk when they go online, less than a fifth of nine to 16 year olds said they had been bothered or upset by something they'd seen online within the past year.<sup>1</sup>

For internet safety information to be helpful, it needs to reflect the reality of young people's experiences online – the risks they face and the actual possibility of harm. Here are a few common online safety myths, along with the truth about each one – and some tips on using that information to help your children stay safe.

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### Myth

Adults who want to harm children target them by pretending to be young people themselves.

### Fact

This can be the case, but according to the Crimes Against Children Research Center,<sup>2</sup> most online offenders admit they are older before trying to convince their victims to meet in person or engage in sexual activity online. They typically rely on flattery and young people's normal interest in sex and relationships to target children, not solely on deception about their age.

### What can you do?

Make sure your children know that adults who want to talk about sex online are breaking the law – it's illegal for an adult to send sexual messages to a child – and should always be avoided. Discuss the risks involved in sending revealing images or using webcams, which can always be recorded. And talk to them about the risks of meeting up with online-only friends in real life. Encourage them to talk to you if they are ever worried about anything that happens online. Show them how to report abuse to CEOP, if anyone online ever makes them feel uncomfortable.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60512/1/\\_\\_lse.ac.uk\\_storage\\_LIBRARY\\_Secondary\\_libfile\\_shared\\_repository\\_Content\\_EU%20Kids%20Online\\_EU%20Kids\\_interactive\\_Final\\_Report\\_2014.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60512/1/__lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_EU%20Kids%20Online_EU%20Kids_interactive_Final_Report_2014.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet---crimes/safety\\_ed.html](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet---crimes/safety_ed.html)

**Myth**

Online child sex offenders typically target very young children.

**Fact**

Offenders typically target children they think will be vulnerable so many try to connect with teenagers who are open to talking about sex.<sup>3</sup> Some do specifically target young children (especially young children who are very active online), so it's important to talk to children of all ages about using the internet safely. The fact is, though, it's teens who are most vulnerable to exploitation online.

**What can you do?**

Try not to frighten your young children too much. It's important to talk to them about staying safe online – make sure they know what is and isn't OK to share, for example – but overstating the risks may make them unduly worried. Try to emphasise boundaries and what is and isn't appropriate to discuss with friends online.

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**Myth**

Sharing personal information online is never safe.

**Fact**

It's difficult to interact online without sharing any personal details. Popular social networking sites and email services all require some amount of personal information to get started. The important thing is to ensure that young people are using the right privacy settings.

**What can you do?**

Encourage your children to think carefully about all the information they share – why do they need to provide it? Who can see it? Warn them about the riskiest types of online interaction – like talking to people they have never met face to face, talking about sex with strangers, sharing revealing images or posting their phone number publicly.

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**Myth**

Social media is too risky and should be for adults and older teens only.

**Fact**

'Social media' is a broad term referring to a wide range of platforms for connecting and communicating online. Some are safer than others, but they all involve a certain amount of risk – and many incorporate tools for preventing harm, like reporting functions, privacy settings and moderators who remove inappropriate content. Many young people use social media safely and productively.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/safety\\_ed.html](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/safety_ed.html)

### What can you do?

Talk to your child about privacy settings and responsible use of social media. Before they set up their first account, you might want to read over the privacy information together and talk about what tools make sense to use. For instance, they could set all their posts to be visible to friends only. You should also look at the terms and conditions on user age – some sites and apps require users to be over 13, 16 or even 18.

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### Myth

Most children have been exposed to sexual images online.

### Fact

According to research from the London School of Economics, around one in seven children reported seeing sexual images online in the past year.<sup>4</sup>

### What can you do?

Don't assume your children are being bombarded with sexual images every time they go online, but make sure they know what they can do if they do come across something inappropriate.

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### Myth

Putting your family computer in a shared room will help you manage your children's internet use and make it easier to keep them safe.

### Fact

This may have been true at one point, but unfortunately it's not so simple anymore. In the age of smartphones, tablets and other portable devices young people can access the internet just about anywhere. And even if they don't personally have a smartphone they could go online using someone else's device or at a friend's house.

### What can you do?

Rather than trying to control everything your child sees, focus on building their resilience. The more confident and knowledgeable they are, the more likely it is that they'll be able to deal with any risks they encounter online.

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### Myth

Children should avoid all risk on the internet.

### Fact

It's not possible or even desirable to avoid all risk online. Children shouldn't take risks unnecessarily, of course – but just as you wouldn't stop a child from learning to ride a bike

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/news/archives/2011/09/toptenmyths.aspx>



because they might fall off, keeping your kids from exploring the online world because it could possibly lead to harm isn't doing them any favours.

### **What can you do?**

Talk to your children about staying safe online in a pragmatic and age-appropriate way. Encourage them to use good judgment and to trust their instinct if they believe something is too good to be true or just doesn't feel right. Make sure they know how to use tools like privacy settings to stay safe while also enjoying all the internet has to offer. Remind them that they can always come to you for help, and make sure they know how and when to report to CEOP. Remember that some level of risk has always been a part of growing up – online and off.

*This article originally appeared on Parent Info – for more resources and information on your children's online resilience, visit [www.parentinfo.org](http://www.parentinfo.org) or [www.parentzone.org.uk](http://www.parentzone.org.uk)*