# A parent and carer's guide to talking to your child or teenager about their relationships online

The internet, technology and social media are powerful tools of connection for children and young people, allowing them to interact with each other and with people anywhere in the world. The impact can be very positive, allowing children and young people to:

- stay in regular contact with friends, reinforcing those bonds
- meet and make new friends that share similar interests
- learn new skills and exchange ideas
- share views and opinions within a safe, supportive setting
- feel a sense of belonging that can boost self-esteem.

That said, things can go wrong and children and young people may experience risky situations, such as sharing intimate personal content without the owner's permission or posting inappropriate photos. This guide explores the risks and gives tips on how to talk with your child about those risks.

**What are the risks of online relationships?**

- A lack of experience in real-world relationships makes children/young people more vulnerable to inappropriate online relationships.
- Using abbreviations, slang and emojis can lead to miscommunications and misunderstandings.
- Sharing intimate or personally identifiable information can put children/young people at risk.

- It's easier to behave inappropriately or misinform when 'anonymous' online.
- Children/young people may experience peer pressure or bullying via social media.
- There's a risk of exposure to inappropriate material and/or harmful behaviours within a particular online community.
- Children/young people may compare themselves with how others present themselves online (which may be false or exaggerated).

It's important to talk with your child about these risks and agree on how to deal with them.

**How can you talk to your child about online relationships?**

**Determine how much you want to share with your child.**
- Choose your words and use age-appropriate explanations about the risks. These definitions may help you.

  o Grooming – establishing an emotional connection to gain a child's trust in order to abuse or exploit them. This can be sexually, emotionally, an attempt to radicalise them or any other purpose.
  o Sexual coercion and extortion (sextortion) – blackmailing someone with the help of self-generated images of that person in order to extort sexual favours, money, or other things from the individual.
  o Sexting – posting online or sending sexual messages or naked or semi-naked photos or video clips via any digital device. Also known as youth-produced sexual imagery.

**Explain how to manage personal information online.**

- **Help your child understand what personal information is**, what is appropriate to share (e.g. favourite food or hobbies) and what to keep tight control over (e.g. date of birth, mobile number, location). Encourage them to use avatars and limit what personal information they give out.

- **Emphasise stranger danger online.** Talk about games and social networking sites where people can follow and 'like' your child. Be clear they should not add or accept strangers as 'friends,' or 'followers' and help them understand the consequences – positive and negative – of beginning conversations with friends.

- **Agree expectations for image sharing.**
  o Start by considering your own sharing. Ask your child before sharing an image of them online.
  o Clarify family expectations – is it okay to share images of your child in swimwear or on holiday? Who is it okay to share these with?
  o What images is it okay for your child to take and share? Make sure they know to ask permission before sharing images of their friends online.

- o What about images they might find online? Encourage a moment of reflection before liking or commenting on an image.
- o Talk about how intimate images are risky: both your child's and images they may receive or take of others. Help them understand the consequences of sharing 'sexting' images. The Sharing images playlist for parents and carers on Hwb has more information about this.

- **Discuss peer pressure.** Talk to your child about how to deal with peer pressure or inappropriate requests. For example:
  - o how to respond to requests for intimate images
  - o understand that boys and girls ask for inappropriate images and both need to know how to respond.

**Online dating and other 'friendship' apps**

Dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble and Badoo have an 18+ rating, or the terms and conditions require the user to be 18+ to use the service. Apps marked for ages 18+ will often contain adult material and content. It is not appropriate for children and young people to be on these apps. Research has shown that despite the age restriction, young people under the age of 18 are using these apps. This can raise serious safeguarding concerns. It is strongly recommended that you do not permit your child to use these apps and that you discuss the dangers and risks posed by being on these apps underage.

It's also worth knowing that there are other apps which are targeted specifically for young people that offer similar features and experiences to dating apps. While they are not explicitly marketed as a dating app they are used to meet new people often based on location. They also have similarities to dating apps in the they are used such as swiping left or right, or being 'matched' with other users (e.g. Skout, Taffy, Yubo or MyLOL).

Some of these apps are popular with young people however they can raise similar safeguarding concerns. If you allow your child to use these apps designed for young people, help them understand how they can stay safe using the following tips.

- Be clear with your child about your rules and expectations around using these apps.
- Help your child understand the challenges of online anonymity, where people can pose as someone very different to who they really are.
- Ensure your child understand how relationships online can be complicated and open to risks that don't occur offline.
- Agree on what is acceptable to post and send with particular caution around sending images or sharing personal information.
- Explain to your child the ways in which any images and personal information that they share might be misused by people they communicate with online.
- Ensure they know what to do if something doesn't feel right.

- Talk to them about the dangers of <u>online grooming.</u>
- Explain to your child that if anything happens online that worries them, or if they have done something that they have agreed with you not to, for example, shared an image, they should tell you about it straight away. Reassure them that they will not get into trouble and you are there to help them.

- You can read more about the risks of online dating apps on the [Parentzone](#) website.

**What if I'm not comfortable talking about this with my child?**

It can feel like a difficult topic, but there are lots of resources to help you.

- Use this [parent and carer's guide](#) on Hwb for tips and ideas for conversation starters.
- Talk about <u>online reputation</u> and read Childnet's <u>online reputation checklist</u> with your child.
- List your expectations for online behaviour.

**Where can I find more resources?**
- Internet Matters has resources for parents/carers on <u>sexting</u>, [online grooming](#) and [apps](#).
- Childnet's resources cover [sexting](#), [online grooming](#) and explain the issue, including how to take control of the situation and what to do if something does occur.
- [ThinkUknow](#) offers resources for children/young people, parents/carers, on how to stay safe online.