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HOW TO KEEP YOUR KIDS SAFE ONLINE

If your child received a new phone or tablet for Christmas, make sure you are proactive in preparing them for the online world, writes Dr David Coleman

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Christmas probably brought some new digital devices into your home. Gaming platforms, tablets, phones or other internet-connected devices all mean that your child(ren) can now access digital media online. They can play games, listen to music, watch videos and stay connected to friends. Entertainment is guaranteed. Keeping your child safe, however, in the online world, is a big task. You have a responsibility to them to make sure they are safe.

You wouldn't bring your 11-year-old to the door of the Natural History Museum in London and leave them off with the instruction to "go and have fun for a couple of hours and I'll be back to collect you then. Don't talk to strangers and don't get yourself into trouble."

But many parents will leave their child with their device for a couple of hours, thinking little about what digital content their child will consume or be unwittingly exposed to or the dangers that may befall them.

I firmly believe that you need to be very proactive and involved in teaching your child how to be safe and how to be critically aware of the content they watch. In the early stages of their access to the internet, you will hopefully be directly supervising what they access and so can intervene when needed to make sure they don't access anything inappropriate or harmful.

As time passes though, you will inevitably give them greater and greater responsibility and freedom to use their device independently of you and your direct supervision. Your child needs be fully prepared for this.

For example, the American Psychological Association has just released its first set of recommendations for healthy teenage video viewing on the basis that "research consistently shows that video content, and the platforms that host it, have the potential to help or harm teens."

Preparing your child for independent access to the internet starts with lots of open communication about their digital experiences. Your children are more likely to come to you with questions or concerns if they feel safe talking about their online experiences. This will be easier if you have created a non-judgmental space (by engaging with them about their favourite apps, websites and games with genuine curiosity) where they can share what they encounter online, even if it's uncomfortable or confusing.

Younger children will need clear rules to navigate the vast online world, while older kids benefit from collaborative discussions about limits. With younger children you will still use parental controls to restrict access to certain apps and websites. As your child gets older and more experienced, you can collaboratively create their boundaries around screen time,

content types, and privacy settings. Importantly, you are discussing the "why" behind the rules.

We know that not everything online is true or safe. A young child, however will not know this and even older children may not question what they see and hear online. The heart of critically analysing content is helping your child to develop a questioning mindset to differentiate between reliable and misleading content.

You will want to introduce concepts like clickbait, misinformation (fake news), and confirmation bias in simple terms. You might want to practice evaluating content together. For example, as you watch something on any of the social media or video sharing platforms you can ask, "Who created this?", "What is their purpose (to inform, entertain, or persuade)?", "Does this source have a bias", "What evidence supports this claim?"

When you come across fake news or exaggerated headlines yourself, for example, you can bring them to your child/teen as real-life examples to help them spot misinformation. You can share how you evaluate information, like checking sources or recognising ads.

You will also need to actively discuss privacy and online security so they can understand how to protect their personal information and thereby reduce the risk of online harm.

You will be explaining why sharing personal details (like full name, school, or location) can be risky. You can role-play scenarios like what to do if a stranger makes contact with them online. You can show them how and why to create strong passwords and avoid clicking on suspicious links.

To equip them for social interactions online, you need to discuss what healthy online friendships look like and how to handle cyberbullying. Showing them the importance of kindness and empathy online, even when they disagree with others, is also important. Never saying anything online that they wouldn't say face-to-face to somebody is a good rule of thumb.

Even when you have discussed all these aspects of their online safety, you will still need to regularly review their online activity.

This is not to spy, but to stay engaged and provide support if needed to empower them to navigate the digital world thoughtfully, responsibly, and confidently.

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