Children can be exposed to sexual predators online, so how can parents teach them to be safe?

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Credit: Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels

Many teenagers use mobile phones and social media almost constantly. And children are gaining access to these devices and platforms at

increasingly younger ages.

This is a challenge for parents who need to keep up with their children's use, the evolution of devices, and how this changes how they have to parent.

Studies show parents feel anxious and lack sufficient knowledge about their children's use of devices.

They're worried about their children being exposed to sexual images and messages online. They're anxious their children could provide personal information to a stranger or, worse, develop a relationship with a stranger online whom they might meet in person.

When parents try to restrict their children's online interactions, children usually find a way around it. Instead, parents should have conversations with children from a young age about cybersecurity. This will help them develop the skills they need to be safe online.

What are children exposed to?

Social networking—which includes interactions through gaming, as well as texting and social media—brings with it exciting opportunities and unique risks.

Online gaming presents unique dangers because user-generated games (where content is developed by gamers on platforms such as Roblox) are not regulated. This means children can be exposed to inappropriate sexualised and violent content.

Children are vulnerable when they interact with other users on social media, in chat rooms and within gaming. This could involve grooming by a sexual predator either to meet in person or send sexually explicit

images.

A report, [Latest Research: Parenting in the Digital Age](#) by the [Office of the eSafety Commissioner](#), found 24% of 8-17-year-olds met someone in real life after initial online encounters.

While the study by the eSafety Commissioner found children and teenagers usually attempted to assess the danger of meeting someone unknown face-to-face, such as by looking for similar interests and ensuring there was no sexual content in the online communication, sexual predators use deceptive tactics to lure their victims into meeting in person.

Another [Australian study](#) found half of children played [online games](#) with someone they didn't know. Boys were more likely to do so than girls.

How do children deal with online situations?

Research has been mixed on how young people manage cybersecurity risks.

One [study](#) found that children who are at least 11 years old seem to have some awareness of the consequences of online interactions. They use [safety measures](#) including removing comments, tags and images and blocking and deleting content when interacting online. They also rarely use photos of themselves and disable their geolocations to protect their identities.

But children also engage in risky behaviors such as [sharing passwords](#) and contacting strangers. [Some findings indicated](#) the more teens use social media sites, the more they tend to disclose [personal information](#).

In one US study, researchers asked nearly 600 students aged 11-13 about cybersafety. The results indicated 40% accepted friend requests from people they do not know, and they were more concerned with protecting their personal information from parents than strangers online.

Several studies found children think parental restrictions are intrusive and invade their privacy. This includes teens feeling disrespected and even stalked by their parents, which leads to a loss of trust.

What can parents do?

Restricting children's online use is unhelpful. Parents should talk to their children about healthy and age-appropriate online interactions.

This includes avoiding disclosing personal information (real name, date of birth, phone number, address, school, or pictures that reveal such information). Parents should provide guidance and explain the consequences of online dangers to their children in a way that does not instill fear but explains their concern.

Parents should talk to their children about online risk and safety behaviors from a young age, as soon as they start using online games and engaging on social media sites, to help them build a stronger foundation for their transition to adolescence.

Teenagers who have frequent conversations with their parents have a greater awareness of online risks.

Children deserve to play online games and participate on social media, but still be protected from harm. Internet technology does have many advantages, including connecting people through social networking, education and recreation. With caution and open communication, the risks can be managed together.

When children are supported and can discuss safety strategies with their [parents](#), they're more likely to reach out when something happens that makes them feel unsure or uncomfortable about certain online interactions.

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