

Coronavirus schools' closure and social distancing - how to keep young people safe online while at home

Schools have closed for an indefinite period while the government tries to limit the spread of COVID 19. Educators are currently exploring different ways in which young people can continue to learn via remote learning without being directly in the classroom. If children are at home for long periods and feeling isolated, they may turn to social networks to reach out to others. This could lead to an increase in online activity amongst young people. Some families may have safeguards and rules in place to keep their children safe from online harm, so, it may be a good idea to revisit them. However, there may be a risk that while young people are feeling vulnerable, they are exposed to an increasing amount of social media chat and fake news about the issue of COVID 19. They could be at risk of several online harms, including grooming, exploitation and bullying. All these issues could impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

A lot of emphasis over the last few weeks has been focused on technology and continuing education online. The internet is a wonderful resource enabling children and young people to connect, communicate and be creative in several different ways on a range of devices. It is essential that during this period, children and young people are free from harm, grooming or exploitation. Educators still have a duty to safeguard young people, no matter where the learning environment may be.

Young people are internet native and have better technical skills than many adults. However, children and young people are not always internet savvy or literate, particularly during this time when they may be feeling in shock, distress and confused about COVID 19 and its risks and impact on loved ones such as parents and grandparents. Young people still need advice, guidance and protection when it comes to managing their lives online. Online groomers, predators and extremists can use this time to target vulnerable young people.

The Prevent Duty recognises the essential role teachers play in ensuring the safety and well-being of the students in their care, and it is no different from complying with standard safeguarding procedures. It should be implemented in the same manner educators approach child sexual exploitation or gang membership.

The Prevent Duty - From 2015 in the Counter Terrorism and Security Act places a statutory duty on schools, institutions, Local Authorities, health, policing and criminal justice to prevent people being drawn into terrorism and extremism. Prevent is about safeguarding and stopping the radicalisation of vulnerable people. Children at risk of exposure to extremist ideology online, if not supported during this time could be in harm's way. Particularly social media posts that exploits fear, vulnerability and the mental health of young vulnerable people during this unprecedented crisis.

During the COVID-19 crisis many people within communities are coming together to offer support and help. However, do be aware that there will be those who try to exploit this situation. Usual current safeguarding protocols to make sure whoever has access to your child even remotely via live streaming or any online platforms must be trusted and vetted with all the current DBS and security checks or part of a trusted education provider.

The UK Safer Internet Centre published the following [Safeguarding Advice for Remote Learning](#) and listed a set of safeguarding checks that might inform parents and educators on how to keep young people safe online during this period.

[The UK Safer Internet Centre](#) has a Professionals Online Safety Helpline (0344 381 4772) where you can get expert advice for those who work with children and young people.

What are the issues and risks?

While this may depend on the age of the child, the UK Safer internet Centre has identified the following online risk categories.

Behaviour: sharing too much information

It is critical young people are aware of the impact they have online as well as on other people. Particularly in terms of their digital footprint. Young people can sometimes feel anonymous without understanding the importance of keeping personal information safe and not sharing this with strangers. Make sure they feel confident enough to report inappropriate conversations, messages or behaviour to a trusted adult.

Content: age-inappropriate or unreliable content or fake news

While browsing online during this period. Young people may come across content that is inappropriate, hurtful or harmful. They can come across this content through social networks, online games, blogs and websites. Many stories are being shared across social networks about COVID 19. Make sure children and young people understand the difference between fake news, an article written from bias and content from a reliable source.

Contact: strangers, bullies, groomers or radicalisers can contact children

If children and young people make friends online during this period, the new online friend may not be who they say they are. Once that person has access to the young person's account, they also have access to the personal information that might even include where a child or young person lives and where they go to school. Responsible adults should speak to the child or young person about their friend's list. Encourage the child or young person to remove any unknown contacts. Ask them how they differentiate between a trusted contact and a stranger online?

Ask the child or young person whether they have privacy settings on their apps. If not, it's essential to add privacy settings to apps to safeguard children or young people from groomers, bullies, radicalisers who seek to do harm and exploit young people. If there is concern that a young person or child has had inappropriate contact or has been approached by a stranger online, it's essential to report this to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (www.ceop.police.uk) or the police. If in any doubt speak to your DSL.

In case of bullying on or offline, make sure the child or the young person is confident to report this to a trusted adult.

Commercialism and financial exploitation: hidden costs of advertising in apps, games and websites

Young people can be at risk of commercial exploitation online. This can include apps, advertising or marketing schemes that can inadvertently make young people spend money online. Make sure you know how to educate the young person about keeping personal information private and blocking popups and spam emails on devices. Consider using a generic family email for registering online forms.

Extremism and radicalisation

When a young person is vulnerable radicalisers from extremist groups could target individuals via several means. This might be in the form of face to face organised groups; however, past case studies of radicalised young people, show that young people can also be radicalised online. Both the Far Right and Islamist inspired groups can use a variety of methods by exploiting the growth in global technology. They will use societal or political grievances during times of instability to pull young people into the world of extremism and violent ideologies by influencing, grooming and ultimately radicalising them to support or carry out acts of violent extremism. This may be in the form of racist memes or videos promoting a "them and us" narrative.

Online has a global reach, and mainstream platforms or encrypted messenger apps where young people share ideas and socialise, can be used by extremists to groom young people. Popular open-source messenger platforms include Discord, Rocket Chat, Viber, Discord and Telegram. Conversations promoting racist, misogynist and homophobic ideologies exploited by extremist groups, are known as "dark social" platforms. There are many more communications channels extremist use, so do be aware of what platforms young people use during this time to communicate, or what may seem like a regular chat for gamers.

Report online material promoting terrorism or extremism

You can **report online material promoting terrorism or extremism** via the Online Tool [www.gov.uk/report-terrorism]. The online tool is for reporting illegal or harmful information, pictures or videos found on the internet.

School staff and individuals can make their reports anonymously and report material such as: articles, images, speeches or videos that:

- promote terrorism or encourage violence
- content encouraging people to commit acts of terrorism
- websites made by terrorist or extremist organisations
- videos of terrorist attacks