

A parent's guide to:

Moving to secondary school

Online safety tips to support children

internet
matters.org



Starting secondary school often comes with more independence, both offline and online. Children might be getting their first smartphone, using apps more freely or spending time online with new friends.

With greater freedom comes the need for new boundaries. Helping children build good digital habits now will make their transition smoother and reduce future risks.

What are kids doing online?

A child transitioning to secondary school might have a greater interest in getting a smartphone to stay in touch with friends or join the latest platform. Whether your child is ready, depends on many things. [Visit our 'first connected device guide' for support.](#)

Your child might be:

- **Joining new group chats** to socialise
- **Exploring trending platforms**
- **Using school apps and video calls** to do homework
- **Joining online trends and challenges**
- **Sharing photos and updates**, building their digital footprint
- **Playing games online** with friends or in multiplayer groups

They may also begin to explore identity, values and friendships in a digital space. This can be empowering, but also risky if they don't have support.



What risks and challenges do they face?

Children's online life isn't separate from their offline one.

Helping them build healthy habits now will shape how they navigate digital life throughout secondary school. Explore the topics below for tips on how to support your child.

- ▶ [Screen time & starting new habits](#)
- ▶ [Peer pressure & digital identity](#)
- ▶ [Cyberbullying & online respect](#)
- ▶ [Misogyny, harmful content & stereotypes](#)
- ▶ [Sexting & image-based pressure](#)
- ▶ [In-game spending & online money habits](#)
- ▶ [Spotting misinformation](#)
- ▶ [Using AI for schoolwork](#)

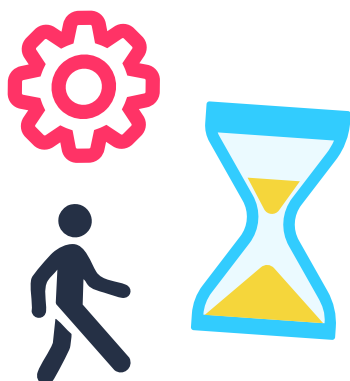
You can also explore a range of [useful resources](#)

Screen time & starting new habits

As school routines shift, screens can become central to how children learn, relax and stay connected. Used well, tech supports creativity, friendships and independent learning.

But without boundaries, screen time can quickly affect focus, mood and sleep, especially when children are tired, overwhelmed or simply adjusting to the new pace of secondary school. Watch out for:

- Late-night scrolling in bedrooms
- Multiscreening during homework
- Using screens to avoid responsibilities or decompress



What can you do to help?

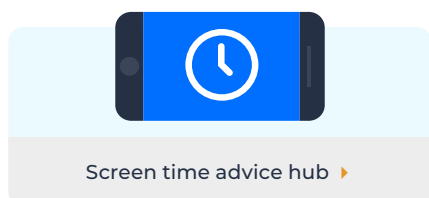
- Create a [family digital agreement](#) to help set screen time boundaries around homework, fun and rest
- **Keep devices out of bedrooms** overnight
- **Encourage one-screen-one-task** during study time
- **Use screen time tools together** to set healthy limits
- Suggest non-screen ways to **relax after school**



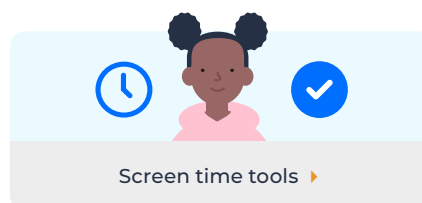
Support from schools

Most schools promote phone-free learning and good study habits. Ask how they support focus and balance in and out of the classroom.

More resources



Screen time advice hub ▶



Screen time tools ▶

Peer pressure & digital identity

As children start secondary school, friendships shift and the pressure to fit in grows.

Online, this can lead them to copying influencers, joining trends or presenting a version of themselves that isn't quite real. Many begin chasing likes and approval, which can shape how they see themselves and others. This might look like:

- Videoing themselves doing trends or challenges that might put them at risk to gain attention or feel involved in what others are doing
- Getting upset if they can't use their device or get the latest products to keep up with others



What can you do to help?

- **Talk about the pressures** they feel online and how to manage that pressure in positive ways
- Offer resources **to keep conversations going** – whether that's with you, a counsellor or a supportive group like those on [Childline](#)
- **Encourage them to practise mindfulness.** How is content making them feel? What can they do when it makes them feel upset?



Support from schools

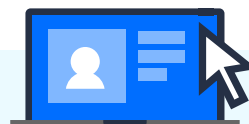
PSHE lessons or other lessons related to health and wellbeing often cover topics related to identity and peer influence, which can include pressure within the digital space. Ask your child's school about the lessons they run on these topics.



More resources



Helping young people manage their online identity ►



Online reputation guide ►

Cyberbullying & online respect

As children build new friendships, misunderstandings and fallouts can easily continue online, especially through group chats, social media or gaming.

What starts as banter can quickly become bullying, and children may struggle to recognise when it's gone too far.



What can you do to help?



- **Talk about the line between joking and bullying**, explaining that people can take our words in different ways, so we should be careful
- **Encourage them to speak up** if they see someone being targeted or if they're being targeted themselves
- **Show them how to block, mute or report users** who are bullying others and encourage them to use those tools for themselves and others
- **Keep records if bullying continues** and share with your child's school; schools can only act on what they know



Support from schools

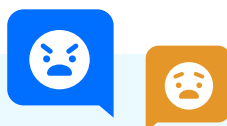


Most schools have clear anti-bullying policies that include online behaviour. Ask how issues are handled and who your child can speak to if something happens. You should also be able to access these policies on the school website.

More resources



[Cyberbullying conversation guide](#) ▶



[Cyberbullying advice hub](#) ▶



[The Online Together Project](#) ▶

Misogyny, harmful content & stereotypes

As children explore online spaces, they may come across sexist jokes, extreme influencers or gendered stereotypes, sometimes without realising the harm.

Algorithms can also amplify this kind of content, especially if it's liked or shared by peers. Signs of risk could include:

- Following influencers or accounts which promote extreme views related to sex, race, religion or other characteristics
- Liking or sharing content which mocks different groups like girls or boys, certain races or religious beliefs
- Repeating stereotypes about gender, race or other characteristics



Support from schools

Respect, equality and online hate are usually covered in PSHE or RSE/RSHE lessons. Ask how your child's school helps students recognise and challenge harmful beliefs and stereotypes.

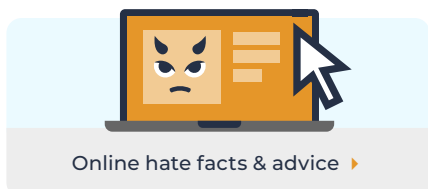


What can you do to help?

- **Talk about respect** and how online content shapes attitudes
- **Call out language** which is intentionally or unintentionally sexist, racist, homophobic, etc. (e.g. 'he plays like a girl' or 'that's gay')
- **Ask about the content they see online.** Have they ever seen something misogynistic/racist/generally hateful?
- Talk about actions they can take to **stop hateful content from spreading online** such as using report tools or avoiding interactions with the content
- **Share diverse, positive role models** that challenge stereotypes
- **Use our interactive tool** to have informed discussions about this topic – [The Online Together Project](#)



More resources



Online hate facts & advice ►



What is misogyny? ►

Sexting & image-based abuse

While it might feel too early to talk about sexting, the pressure to share sexual images can begin as children start secondary school.

If older pupils are involved or group chats turn inappropriate, this might happen sooner. Children may not fully understand the risks or may think it's harmless and expected in relationships.



Support from schools

Most schools cover consent, relationships and image-sharing in RSE/RSHE. Ask when these topics are taught and how you can reinforce the messages at home.

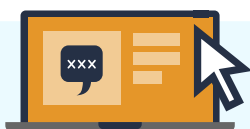


What can you do to help?

- Talk early about **consent, respect and healthy boundaries**
- Use **real-life stories or news headlines** to start conversations and gauge your child's understanding of the issue
- **Remind them they can talk to you** without fear or blame if they share an image or receive requests for images
- Boys say they feel pressure to get images from girls while girls say they feel pressure to send images. Acknowledge these pressures and **discuss the importance of feeling comfortable in relationships**
- **If an image is shared** or they're threatened for money or more images ([sextortion](#)):
 - Use [Report Remove](#) to request deletion from the internet
 - Report exploitation or threats to [CEOP](#)



More resources



[Sexting advice hub](#) ▶



[Sexual image-sharing among kids](#) ▶



[What is sextortion?](#) ▶

In-game spending & online money habits

Many popular games encourage spending on skins, upgrades or loot boxes.

For children new to managing money, it's easy to overspend without realising it. Pressure to keep up with friends can also make purchases feel "essential." Look out for:

- Spending through pocket money or gift cards quickly
- Repetitive requests for spending money in games to avoid feeling left out
- Frustration or upset over in-game spending limits



What can you do to help?

- **Discuss how your child is spending money and why** to better understand cost and needs when it comes to in-game purchases
- Consider **adding reloadable gift cards** rather than credit cards
- **Set clear expectations** before adding payment methods
- **Use parental controls** to block or limit in-game purchases, including setting monthly limits where possible



Support from schools

Some schools explore money habits and online spending in PSHE, Maths or citizenship lessons. Ask if digital purchases or gaming costs are covered.

More resources



[Online money management advice](#) ▶



[In-game spending guide](#) ▶



[Managing pressures to buy](#) ▶

Spotting misinformation

As children start searching for homework help or exploring trends, they might come across content that isn't always accurate or safe.

At this age, they may struggle to spot fake facts or biased sources, especially if peers are sharing them too. Watch out for them:

- Repeating conspiracy theories or viral misinformation
- Sharing false information as fact without realising it
- Feeling confused or worried by online content



What can you do to help?

- **Create a fact-checking rule:** always check at least 2 trusted sources
- Talk about **what makes a source reliable or not**
- **Encourage them to ask you** when they're not sure if something is true or reliable
- **Explain that** even artificial intelligence (AI) tools or influencers can get it wrong



Support from schools

Media literacy is often built into English, computing and PSHE lessons or similar. Ask how your child is being taught to check sources and think critically.

More resources



[Misinformation advice hub](#) ▶



[Types of fake news](#) ▶



[Find the Fake quiz](#) ▶

Using AI for schoolwork

AI tools are now built into many everyday apps from search engines to schoolwork software.

Children might use ChatGPT, Google's AI search or Microsoft Copilot in Word or PowerPoint to help with tasks. These tools can be helpful for brainstorming but they can also provide biased, incomplete or incorrect information.



Support from schools

More schools are now exploring AI use in computing lessons and homework policies. Ask how your child's school is addressing AI use and what guidance pupils are given.

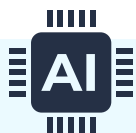


What can you do to help?



- **Talk about how AI tools may not always be accurate** and can sometimes make up 'facts'
- **Use AI tools together** at first to model healthy habits such as using it to breakdown a Maths problem but not give the answer
- **Remember that most AI tools require users to be 13 or older**, and your child should not use these tools without you before this age
- Encourage them to use AI only to support ideas, **never to replace their own thinking**
- **Set ground rules** like "fact-check with 2 sources" or "ask me before using it"
- **Stress that personal information** should never be shared with chatbots

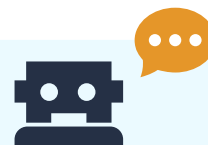
More resources



[AI safety & support](#) ▶



[A parent's guide to AI tools](#) ▶



[What are AI chatbots?](#) ▶

Where to get help and useful resources

Search on internetmatters.org to explore these top resources:



[Pre-teen online safety guide](#)



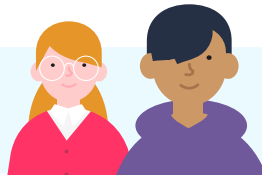
[Parental controls guides](#)



[Apps and platforms guides](#)



[The Online Together Project tool](#)



[Check-in templates](#)



[Report online harm](#)

Get personalised advice straight to your inbox

Want support to stay on top of your kids' digital lives? Together, we've got this, with our free personalised family digital toolkit. By completing the form you'll get:

- Age-specific checklists and guides
- Safety information on the latest apps and platforms
- Resources to tackle online concerns by age
- Interactive tools to encourage discussions on key topics

Scan the QR code or go to internetmatters.org/toolkit



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