SPOTLIGHT ON SAFEGUARDING

Working together to keep our young people safe

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Advice on new devices for Christmas

As the Christmas season approaches, many parents and caregivers will be considering getting children their first internet connected device. Whether it's a smartphone, a tablet, or a gaming console, it's important to set boundaries from the start to ensure healthy tech habits and safety.

Take a moment to think about how your child currently uses technology and how you envisage them using the new device.

Why implement boundaries from the start?

Allowing children unrestricted access to the internet can expose them to various risks that many parents may not initially be aware of. Here's why setting boundaries when your child first receives a device is important:

1. **Exposure to inappropriate content:** The internet contains content that may not be suitable for children, from graphic images to violent videos and adult websites.
2. **Cyberbullying:** Online platforms can sometimes become spaces for cyberbullying. Children with unrestricted access might be more vulnerable to encountering or participating in harmful behaviour.
3. **Privacy and online predators:** Children may not fully understand the importance of keeping personal information private, which can lead them to overshare details such as their name, location, or school. This information can be used by online predators, who often frequent online spaces where young people are active.
4. **Screen addiction and mental health:** Too much screen time, especially on social media or video platforms, can lead to issues like screen addiction, reduced attention span, and mental health struggles.
5. **Impact on sleep:** Unrestricted access often means children use devices late into the night, which can interfere with sleep and, in turn, affect their focus and performance in school. Creating limits on when and how long devices can be used helps ensure that tech use doesn't interfere with academics or health.

Practical advice: Before gifting your child a new device, take time to set it up with appropriate restrictions. This proactive step lets you establish necessary boundaries, such as screen time limits, content filters, and privacy settings, so that the device is ready for safe, responsible use from day one.

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Gaming: Important considerations for parents

1. **Addiction and time management:** Many games are designed to be incredibly engaging, encouraging players to continue playing to achieve new levels or collect rewards. Without proper boundaries, this can lead to excessive screen time, interfering with school responsibilities, chores, and other essential daily tasks.
2. **Impact on mental health:** Excessive gaming has been linked to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and even depression, particularly when it becomes a primary coping mechanism for real-world challenges. Over time, this can affect self-esteem and emotional resilience.
3. **Social isolation:** While many games offer online interactions, too much gaming can sometimes replace face-to-face friendships and family time. Children may choose gaming over in-person socialising, leading to feelings of loneliness.
4. **Exposure to inappropriate content:** Numerous games feature violence, strong language, or mature themes. Even titles marketed for younger audiences can expose children to content that may not be suitable. Multiplayer games might also subject kids to negative behaviours from others, such as cyberbullying or inappropriate remarks.
5. **Sleep disruption and health issues:** Gaming late into the night can disrupt sleep patterns, resulting in fatigue, poor focus, and irritability. Prolonged periods of sitting can also impact physical health, leading to issues like eye strain, headaches, and a lack of exercise.

Twitch: How to make sure your children use it safely

Twitch is a popular live-streaming platform used by millions of children and young people, focused mainly on gaming but also featuring music, art, and talk shows. Here's what parents need to know:

1. Unfiltered content: Twitch streams are live, meaning content can be unpredictable and occasionally inappropriate.
2. Live chat: Viewers interact with streamers and other users in real-time, with some chats containing unkind or inappropriate content.
3. Community influence: Children can connect with streamers and online communities, which can influence behaviour and perspectives.
4. High time commitment: Streams can last for hours, making it easy for teens to spend excessive time on the platform.

Ensuring children's safety on Twitch

- Activate parental controls and safe mode: Enable Twitch's 'Safe Mode' and parental controls to filter out mature content, reducing the risk of exposure to inappropriate streams or language.
- Monitor and establish time limits: Keep track of the channels your child follows and set limits on their Twitch usage to prevent excessive screen time. Open discussions about safe online behaviour and their viewing choices can promote responsible engagement.