

What are parental controls and how can they help children stay safe online?

Parental controls are a key part of a parent's online safety toolkit and a great first step to helping protect your child online, although they're not a one-stop solution to staying safe. Talking to your children and encouraging responsible behaviour is still absolutely vital.

What are parental controls?

Parental controls are software and tools that allow parents to set controls on their children's internet use. They are a great way of helping prevent children from accessing unsuitable content online.

Internet Matters has developed a [web app](#) that allows you to create a personalised checklist for setting parental controls in your home and on your family's devices. This contains help and advice on setting the controls for your home broadband and the mobile devices your family may use, including how-to videos and step-by-step guides.

Types of controls

Talk of 'controls' can sometimes be confusing. In essence, there are three types that parents need to be aware of:

- Network level controls are set on the hub or router and apply to all devices connected to that hub or router (covering your whole household).
- Device level controls are set on the device itself, such as a smartphone, and will apply regardless of how and where the device is connected to the internet.
- Application controls are set on the platform or application that is being used. Examples of this would be the settings applied to Google or YouTube. Again, these apply anywhere.

What do they do?

There are many types of controls available, and they allow you to do a number of different things, such as:

- Filter and block content that you don't want your children to see, such as violence and pornography.
- Restrict what information is shared.
- Set time limits on how long children are online.
- Control the time of day that children can access the internet.
- Set different profiles so that each family member has an access level that is appropriate to them.

Home broadband controls

Most internet providers like BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media offer free filters, giving you control over what internet content comes into your home. This means that any device that connects to your home broadband is subject to the controls that you have set on your home router or hub. These are sometimes referred to as 'whole home filters'.

Internet-enabled devices

Smartphones, computers and tablets are shipped with controls that can be set up to restrict access to explicit content, in-app purchasing and other content that you don't want your child to access.

Most games consoles and devices are internet-enabled, allowing users to surf the web, as well as in-game purchasing and chat with other online players. All the major gaming consoles and devices come with controls that allow parents to decide what can and cannot be done, both on the console itself and in online gaming platforms such as Xbox Live. Some allow you to set up different profiles with different rights for each family member.

Search engines

It's possible that children may sometimes come across things online which are inappropriate for their age and stage of development when they are browsing the internet. The main search engines allow you to set up filters, such as Google SafeSearch, that can help you block inappropriate or explicit images from your results. These filters are not 100% accurate, but they help you avoid most adult content. You should also consider encouraging the use of child-friendly search engines such as Swiggle and Safe Search UK.

Entertainment Platforms

If you and your family access entertainment content via the internet you should also consider setting Controls on the platforms you use. YouTube, iTunes, BBC iPlayer and Sky Go all have safety settings available. Each is different and some, such as Netflix, allow you to create individual profiles with different control levels so that each family member only sees content that is appropriate to them.

Mobile networks

The mobile operators allow you to set restrictions on what can be accessed via their networks. Most are automatically set to block 18+ content and require the account holder's permission to change this. It is worth checking with your mobile provider exactly what is and is not blocked, and if this applies to their pay-as-you go handsets as well as their pay monthly options. We do recommend that Controls are set on the mobile device itself as well as on the mobile network. Mobile network controls will not apply when the device is being used via a wi-fi connection.

So what should you do?

Controls are not a single solution to staying safe online; talking to your children and encouraging responsible behaviour is critical. However, controls are a vital first step to helping to protect your child online, and here seven simple things you can do:

1. **Set up home broadband parental controls:** make use of controls on your home broadband.
2. **Set controls on your search engine:** encourage your child always to use child-friendly search engines and activate and lock the safe search settings on the browsers and platforms they use.
3. **Make sure every device is protected:** controls should be installed on every device your child uses: mobile phone, tablet and games consoles (both home and handheld).

4. **Privacy settings:** activate the safety measures offered by different sites; social networking sites like Facebook have privacy settings that will help prevent your child seeing unsuitable advertising.
5. **Block pop-ups:** if you're worried about your children accessing inappropriate content though accidentally clicking on adverts in pop-ups, BBC Webwise has advice on how to stop these.
6. **Find good sites and agree on them as a family:** by talking to your child about their interests you can help them find suitable sites to visit and apps to use. Review these sites as they get older.
7. **Manage their use and access:** your child may be less likely to let you know they're distressed by something they've seen online if they think you'll take away their internet access but it may be appropriate to do this in some instances. Be aware of this when talking to them, and let them know they can talk to you or a trusted adult whenever they need to.

Internet Matters has developed a web app that allows you to create a personalised checklist for setting parental controls in your home and on your family's devices. The app also contains help and advice on setting the controls, including how-to videos and step-by-step guides.