Why is online safety important for under 5s?

We all put safety measures in place for young children, from baby gates to sun protection and encouraging road awareness. Now that using digital devices is part of daily family life, it's a good idea to take steps to keep them safe online too.
When you think about it, children are watching and experiencing life online from a very early age. Babies may see their parents using screens from the moment the first photo of them is snapped. Their early babbling words can be shared with grandparents on video calls. Many toddlers can swipe before they can talk.

It's important to help your child build their digital intelligence so they have the skills to protect themselves long after they have left your side. This is why we say it's never too early to start talking about online safety.

There are three main types of risk to keep in mind, so you can help prevent unintentional exposure.

- Contact risks — for example, your child may talk or play online with someone they don't know; or their data may be harvested while they are playing with a connected device, revealing personal information like their name, age and location.
- Conduct risks — for example, others may be unkind or disrespectful to your child; this may escalate into cyberbullying (threatening, intimidating, harassing or humiliating a child online); or later in life your child's permanent 'digital footprint' may include information and images they would prefer were not public, such as photos of them that you or other family members or friends once tagged and shared online.
- Content risks — for example, your child could watch poor quality shows or play games unsuitable for their age; or they may accidentally view age-inappropriate content.

Practical tips to use with under 5s

Many of us didn't need online safety skills when we were children, so we are still learning how to manage the risks ourselves. To help parents and carers of children under 5, eSafety has developed some easy-to-follow tips.

1. Model good screen habits

The first thing you can do as a parent or carer is to be more aware of how you interact with digital technology, especially how often you pick up your phone. This can start from when your child is a baby — remember, they are watching and learning from you every moment. Think about how much time you devote to texting, checking social media or being distracted by screens.
Read more advice on how to model good screen practices for your child.

https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/blogs/how-model-good-screen-practices-for-your-child

2. Set some rules

Toddlers and preschoolers can learn rules to keep them safe while they are using devices, like when to ask for help. They can also be encouraged to think critically about who can contact them and how sharing information might affect them.
You can fill out our family tech agreement with your child to help set some boundaries – the characters from ABC Play School make it fun to do. You can also watch a special Play School episode about online safety together.
https://www.abc.net.au/abckids/shows/play-school/extension-ideas/kiya-ebirthday/12172742

For more ideas, read our advice on managing time online.
https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/big-issues/time-online

3. Start talking about using screens safely

Talking about using screens safely from a very early age encourages habits that will help your child as they explore, learn, create and connect with others online.
You can begin by talking to toddlers and preschoolers about what you are doing on your screen as you search for an address, send a text or post a picture on social media. Encourage them to ask questions and help them to understand what you are doing and why. You can also talk to your child about what they like to do online – read how to choose good online content to help guide this discussion.

https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/children-under-5/how-choose-good-online-content

Next, start including our four key eSafety Early Years messages in your conversations — they will help your child both online and offline.

- **Be safe** — help your child understand the connected world, how they can protect their personal information and who it is safe to communicate with online.
- **Be kind** — show your child how to be kind and respectful online and model good habits around device use and online sharing.
- **Ask for help** — teach your child when to ask for help and let them know they can come to you with any issue.
- **Make good choices** — help your child to think critically about the content they watch and how they spend their time online.

Use parental controls

Parental controls are software tools that allow you to monitor and limit what your child sees and does online.
They can be set up to do things like:

- Block your child from accessing specific websites, apps or functions (like using a device's camera, or the ability to buy things).
- Filter different kinds of content — such as 'adult' or sexual content, content that may promote self-harm, eating disorders, violence, drugs, gambling, racism and terrorism.
- Allow you to monitor your child's use of connected devices, with reports on the sites they visit and the apps they use, how often and for how long.
- Set time limits, blocking access after a set time.

If a device or program is shared by multiple members of your family, you should be able change the tool settings to reflect each user's age and skills.

The esafety commissioner provides extensive information on using parental controls on a range of devices, please follow the link to find relevant device information.
https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/skills-advice/taming-technology