

# TRUST

## Not everything online is true

The internet provides access to potentially limitless information on a huge range of topics. Be it searching for information related to a school homework topic, browsing websites for content about their favourite hobby, keeping up to date with news or sport or discovering something new, the internet can be a very exciting place for young people to explore. The huge rise in popularity of social networking sites, services and apps also now presents young people with an increased freedom about who they can connect and communicate with online.

However, this increased freedom also presents a number of challenges in regards to the reliability of content found online. These challenges are faced by anyone using the internet but are sometimes magnified for young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who may find it difficult to critically evaluate information they find online. The main challenge concerns reliability; both of information and other users.

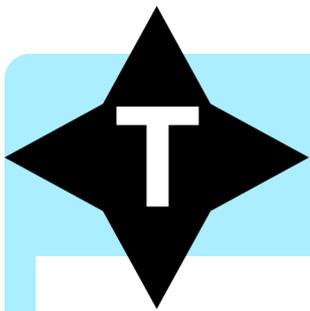


### Reliability of information

The internet is an invaluable tool for young people to find information and content that increases their knowledge, understanding and skills across a range of subjects and topics. For anyone searching for and accessing information online, there is always a judgement they have to make about whether the information they are presented with can be trusted. This can be a difficult one to make for any online user, but becomes especially problematic for young people with ASD who may take anything presented to them literally and may not recognise the need to be critical of what they read or see.

Content online can be in the form of text, images/graphics, photos, videos or audio/music. Any site online could present a biased view or seek to misinform users, and this can present problems for some young people with ASD if they do not question the information they find there. When searching for information on a homework topic, a popular site for many young people is Wikipedia; an online encyclopaedia that allows any internet user to edit the entries. This allows users to keep articles up to date or improve the work of others, but it also presents opportunities for mistakes to be made, information to be deleted or false/biased information to be added to mislead readers. Other sites where users can post their own answers, opinions or thoughts in response to a question can also be subject to bias.

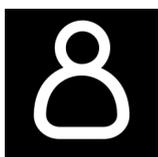
Some forms of bias that exist in information found online can potentially be more harmful than someone getting their facts wrong or posting the wrong information. Some sites and services may contain content that is extremist in nature, or content that promotes hurtful or harmful behaviour e.g. pro anorexia comments and photos or pro suicide discussions.



## Advice

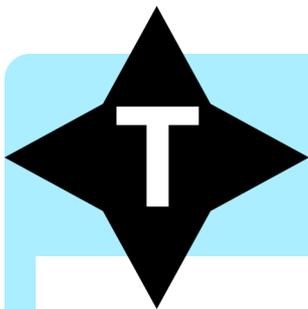
For some young people with ASD it is likely that they will always take content literally, regardless of messages to the contrary! However the following advice can be used to discuss the concept of reliability of information and also provide them with practical strategies they can follow whenever searching for information online. By following some of these strategies they can increase their chances of finding more reliable information:

- ◆ Remind young people that every person has a different opinion or belief. As almost everything online is created by someone, what they share and how they share it may be personal to the person who wrote it. Some discussion with young people may also be needed if they perceive everything others have written to be incorrect because it doesn't match their own beliefs and opinions.
- ◆ Encourage young people to always check at least three websites when searching for information. If the facts don't match up between the sites, then they may need to explore more websites to continue to check the information.
- ◆ Remind young people that books in school and in their local library are still excellent sources of information.
- ◆ Asking other people for help when they are searching for information is also a good step. Encourage them to ask you, their parents, siblings or friends to check what they've found and let them know if they are on the right track.
- ◆ Helping young people improve their search skills when using search engines such as Google, Bing and Yahoo can also help them develop greater independence in finding the sites most likely to provide trustworthy information. Please see [an excellent and detailed blog post by Ken Corish](#) on how to get the most out of search engines (particularly when searching for images) .
- ◆ Work with your pupils to create a list of trusted sites they can explore to find information on school topics and other topics they have a personal interest in. This list could be displayed in the classroom or saved as a favourites or bookmark list in the web browsers they use at school. These lists could also be circulated on the school's website so pupils and parents and carers can refer to them outside of school.



## Reliability of other internet users

There are now a huge number of ways in which a young person can interact with other users online. This could be via a social networking site, an online discussion board or forum, instant messaging, video chatting services or through chat channels while playing an online game. For young people with ASD this can provide positive opportunities to communicate with others, without some of the complexities of offline social interactions that they may find challenging (e.g. eye contact, tone/volume of voice, gestures and non-verbal cues).



Many sites and services allow other users to be added as friends to contacts list, and the use of the term **'friend'** and the idea of friendship online are concepts that are important to explore with young people. This is in order to help them recognise the differences between online and offline interactions, and the risks associated with them.



## Further information and advice

In the same way that information online may not always be trustworthy, it is important to make pupils aware that not all users are trustworthy or truthful in the things that they share online. People can remain anonymous or create a different identity on the internet and so text, photos and even live video are not a guarantee of a person's identity. Even when chatting face to face on video chat, a user could stream recorded footage of someone else rather than show themselves. For young people with ASD, they may not recognise the facial or non-verbal cues that might suggest that the video footage is not live.

When it comes to questioning the information we find online we can employ different methods to check its reliability. However when it comes to checking the reliability of what someone has shared about themselves there is no tried and tested way to prove (or disprove) them.

It is therefore important to help young people realise that people they only know and have met in an online context are still strangers, regardless of how friendly they appear or how much they have shared about themselves. In the same way that we should not tell a stranger on the street our personal information (e.g. full name, telephone number, home address etc.) we shouldn't share these things with an online stranger either.

It is highly likely that young people will interact with other users via sites, services and games during their time online so always advise them that if they are adding users to a friends/contacts list, they should only add people that they already know offline.

Please make use of the messages and activities from **'SAFE'** when it comes to personal information and follow this up with the advice in **'ACTION'** which explores the idea of telling someone.



## Pop ups and in-app purchases

The free nature of many sites, games and apps often means that advertising will often appear while using the service. Pop up adverts and windows have long been a strategy used to display adverts on computers and are becoming increasingly common when using free games or apps on a smartphone or tablet. For a young person with ASD, distinguishing between pop up adverts and other messages that actually require attention or action can be challenging and there may be the temptation to click on all pop ups to see where they lead.



With both free and paid games on smartphones, tablets and video game consoles, there has also been a shift towards in-app purchasing, which is buying extra features or content within the game by using real world currency. For example, purchasing virtual bananas for your pet monkey in an app which uses the credit card information stored on the account. For many young people, it's challenging for them to recognise that purchases made in a game may relate to using real money. This means that they could freely charge a number of virtual items to a credit card if a game has encouraged them to do so.



## Advice

- ◆ Encourage pupils to stop and tell someone if a message appears on the screen that they are unsure about. That person can then help them to decide if the message is an advert or another type of content.
- ◆ It is important to discuss with pupils that there are adverts on the internet, in the same way as they see adverts on the TV, at the cinema and in magazines etc. Make it clear that these adverts can sometimes be trickier to spot or understand. Exploring the persuasive language that adverts use (perhaps as part of work in literacy lessons) can sometimes help young people look out for those words and phrases online and potentially recognise some adverts.
- ◆ We remind young people that if something sounds too good to be true then it probably is! For many young people with ASD this message may not be suitable, but you can discuss some adverts in terms of a cause and effect relationship:

*e.g. an advert says 'You've won a brand new laptop! Click here to receive it'.*

Discuss with a young person whether they have entered a competition to win a laptop. If they haven't then they can't have won it! Does entering a competition always mean we will win? If you did win, how might the organisers get in touch with you (e.g. email, letter, phone call)?

- ◆ Make pupils aware that things can be bought on the internet through websites, apps and games. The things that we buy may be physical things that are then delivered to us, or digital items we can download or access online. Encouraging them to look out for symbols that indicate money (such as £, \$ and € symbols) can help them recognise when something has to be paid for online.
- ◆ Inform parents and carers to that any devices or accounts that their children are using may store payment information at the point of when they were set up. They need to make sure that the account is set up with a password that must be entered before anything can be purchased. This can ensure that young people do not inadvertently buy in-game content and charge it to a credit card.