Supporting autistic young people online

Childnet

1. Talk about life online and take a balanced approach

Show an interest in what autistic young people are doing online. Ask about their favorite apps, games, and videos, and what they like about them. You could use a prompt image to start the conversation or ask them to show you the things they enjoy. Take a look at Childnet's practical resource My Life Online which is designed to support those conversations. Some autistic young people may have a special interest that means they use very specific or niche apps. Talking to them can help you learn more about these or provide the opportunity to explore them together.

2. Stay informed about apps and games

Research apps and games that children and young people are using or asking to use. It's okay not to know as much about it as them, but having a good understanding will give you the confidence to know how to support them and the best ways to respond if issues arise. Some great places to start would be Common Sense Media, Internet Matters, and the Family Gaming Database, where you'll find helpful guides, reviews and ratings.



3. Make use of educational resources

Use activities and learning styles that work best with the young people in your care. Scenario activities are good at helping young people understand other people's perspectives, allowing them to think about what's best to do in certain situations. Take a look at Childnet's STAR Toolkit which offers a wide range of activities offered in different learning styles to repeat and reinforce online safety messages. Thrive Online focuses on happy and healthy online relationships and includes lesson plans for educators and advice for parents and carers. Both resources include short videos. Group Chats is a resource which includes a collection of activities to explore the safe and responsible use of group chats with supporting images and scenarios.



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4. Have clear expectations and routines

If possible, have clear expectations about technology and internet use from when they first start using devices, but even if they have been using the internet for a while, it's never too late to start putting boundaries in place. Every child and family is different so think about what will work best for you. You might want to consider having clear and consistent timings of when devices can be used and for how long.

For autistic young people, it can be good to think about how you are showing these time limits. Some children may find it useful to have reminders such as visual timetables and physical timers to help reduce the stress of sudden transitions.

To support conversations and mapping out when and how devices will be used, take a look at Childnet's Family Agreement. It's important to review and adjust these routines, especially as your child gets older, so you might want to consider giving clear dates or milestones of when you will review certain expectations and routines.



5. Model positive technology use

It's important that parents and carers, educators and other trusted adults in a young person's life model the behavior they want to see in the young person, especially online, so they can see that this is something they should do too.

This could look like making sure to ask for permission before taking photos or sharing them online, not sharing personal information such as a child in their school uniform, making sure you are evaluating information you see online by not believing headlines or information without looking further into it, and checking other sources.

It could also be that you model a healthy screentime balance by doing things like putting your device in another room for meal times, or not using your device when they aren't allowed to be on theirs. You can also model behaviour around reporting, showing that you report any harmful content you see.

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6. Support autistic children and young people with screen time

For some young people, technology is a vital part of their everyday life. It may be their main method of communication, they may use a stimming app, or a screen could serve as a long-term regulating tool. The internet can be a place where they can relax and de-stress, feel part of something, or connect with others, which could be more of a struggle in person. It offers young people the chance to find out new things and find joy from special interests.

It's important to make decisions around technology and screen time based on what works for an individual young person and their family. However, technology is designed to keep us coming back and attached to our screens. This could be through algorithms creating endless feeds, notifications from games (e.g. your lives have been replenished), or the pressure to not lose a streak on apps like Duolingo.

Autistic children in particular may need extra help with managing screen time. You should communicate possible warning signs that they've been online too long. This could include experiencing sore eyes, tiredness, or headaches, or that the device starts to overheat and the battery runs low, all indicating someone has been on a device for a long period of time. You may want to make or find a social story in relation to screen time that could support with understanding expectations.

Visual cues, such as visual timetables, timers, and symbols of a clock and a time, can be helpful so young people can clearly see how long they've got left on their device. A 'red, amber, green' system can also help to communicate the expected behavior whilst a young person is using a device, and if the behavior isn't followed then they may need to take a break and stop using the screen.



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7. Talk to autistic children and young people directly about common online risks

Be clear about risks young people may experience online, explaining what they are and what you want the young person to do. Some examples we have heard which are particularly relevant for autistic young people are:

- The difference between a friend they know offline and a friend they only know online. Be clear that if they are ever asked for personal information, pictures or videos, to go live, or to meet up, tell a trusted adult about it straight away and together you can report them
- How to spot unreliable content online
- How to appropriately manage communication with their friends online (e.g. not immediately sending lots of messages if they don't get an instant reply)
- What to do if they see something online that worries, upsets, or confuses them

8. Make use of parental controls at home, or filtering and monitoring in school, and talk openly about why they are being used

Parental controls and filtering and monitoring can be a good way to reduce the chance of a child seeing something inappropriate and potentially harmful. However, they aren't perfect and some content you wish to be restricted can still find its way through or young people might find ways to get around them, so it's important to be open about why you have put them in place by explaining that they are there to keep them safe. There are plenty of different websites and services that can help you put these into place. A good place to start is Internet Matters which offers free step-by-step guides on how to put these controls in place on various devices, apps, and games. With all settings you are putting into place, review them regularly as how your children use the internet will change over time, so you want to make sure those controls are up to date and purposeful. It is also important to test out these parental controls yourself to make sure they are working how you intend.

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9. Help autistic children and young people to communicate their worries or how they're feeling



Some autistic young people might struggle to clearly communicate how they're feeling or if something has happened, especially if it's taken place online. Some ideas of how they could communicate this could be:

- A book/diary to write something down
- Emotion or symbol cards
- Messaging, emailing, or sending a voice note
- Pointing on a scale or 1-10 graph of how they are feeling

Remember if a child is not ready to communicate about something that has happened, consider coming back to it at another time and telling them when you will do that.

10. Remind autistic children and young people that they can come to you about anything

If a young person comes to you with a concern, try to remain calm and curious, rather than furious. Avoid blame or criticism, as this may close down the conversation if they feel they have done something wrong or they are in trouble. Instead, remain non-judgmental, acknowledge the challenges they have overcome, and thank them for telling you. Try and work out what has happened and be clear about what you are going to do next.



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