

Safeguarding this Christmas

As the Christmas season approaches, many families 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.

Getting a new device for Christmas is exciting - it can open a world of learning, creativity and connection. But it also introduces children to a digital world that isn't always designed with their safety in mind. Setting clear boundaries and protective measures early on helps children learn to use technology in healthy, balanced and age-appropriate ways. Without guidance, young users can stumble into areas of concern: social media platforms that encourage comparison and oversharing gaming chats that expose them to strangers or apps that collect more personal data than you might expect. These risks don't mean children shouldn't enjoy their new devices - they simply mean they need structure and support to navigate them confidently.

Here are some ways to make sure your child's first steps with a new device are positive ones:



1. Set it up before it gets wrapped.

Before gifting the device, take time to install updates, set parental controls and review privacy settings. This includes switching on filters, limiting app store access and setting up family accounts. Doing this ahead of time keeps Christmas morning focused on joy rather than set up stress - and gives you peace of mind from the start.



2. Agree on clear expectations.

Talk as a family about when and where the device can be used. For example, no phones at the dinner table or gaming at bedtime. These routines help children learn balance and prevent screen time from creeping into every moment of the day.



3. Talk about social media early.

Many social platforms have age limits (typically 13+), but children often feel pressure to join sooner. Keep the conversation open about why these limits exist, what 'friends' really means online and how to handle content that feels uncomfortable or unkind.



4. Guide them through gaming safely.

Games are fun and social, but online play can include chats with strangers or in-game purchases. Encourage your child to only play with people they know, keep personal details private and tell you if something doesn't feel right. Use built-in parental settings on consoles and gaming apps to manage time and communication.



5. Keep passwords and downloads shared.

Agree that you'll know passwords and approve new apps or purchases, at least while your child is learning to manage their own digital choices. This helps you stay involved without needing to hover.



6. Encourage balance.

Screens are just one part of a child's world. Make sure there's time for outdoor play, reading and family time too. Children learn from what they see, so model healthy habits by unplugging together.