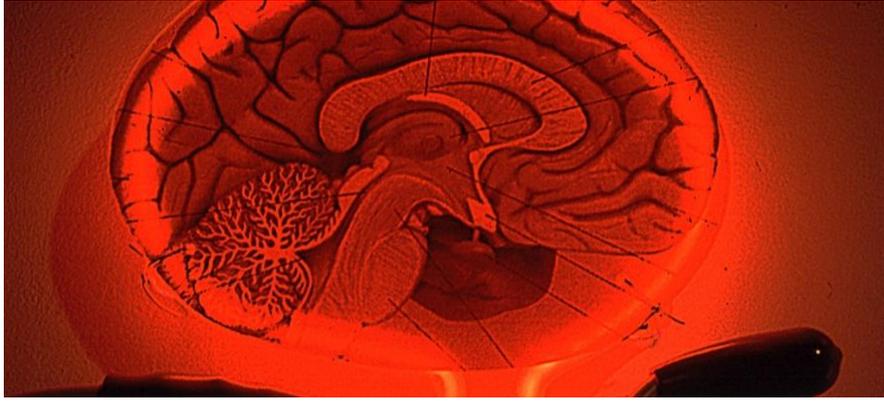


# Learning disabilities, autism and internet safety



*Photo: Carolyn Speranza*

## **There are real benefits to internet use for young people with learning disabilities and autism.**

The internet generally may often be an easier place of communication for children with autism and learning disabilities; but there are also many specially designed apps and programmes, with accessible design, simplified language and video clips that provide wonderful opportunities for learning.

Young people with autism and other communication disorders often find online interactions easier than face-to-face. Emoticons clearly express emotions - happy, sad, amused etc - which can be a real help for those who find it hard to decode the body language, facial expressions and vocal tone.

Online learning also provides opportunities for repetition, so can be helpful for children who take longer to learn new things. They can go over activities as many times as needed to make sure they have mastered any particular bit of learning.

Along with the many advantages to children and young people using the internet come some risks. Access to technology also means potential access to cyberbullying, online grooming and exposure to inappropriate content.

Of course, these are risks for all children and young people using the internet,. But the risk can be more profound for young people with a learning disability, who may be more vulnerable, have tendencies to obsessive compulsive behaviour, and social naivety. Pupils with Special Educational Needs are 16% more likely to be persistently cyberbullied over a prolonged period of time.<sup>1</sup>

## **Preparing your child to use the internet**

Before your child begins using the internet regularly you might want to discuss some strategies for staying safe. For instance:

- Establish ground rules with your child about how they can use the Internet, when and for how long.
- Talk to your child about the kind of things it is ok to look at. A basic rule could be if I won't let you watch it on television, it's not ok to search for it online.
- Ensure your child knows to come to you or another trusted adult if they see something that upsets them.
- Talk to your child about what it is and isn't ok to tell people about themselves online. Encourage your child to use an online nickname and avatar and to tell you if anyone requests their real name, photos or information about where they live or go to school.
- Agree that if your child receives an email with an attachment that they will talk to you before they open it.
- Talk to your child about rules for being polite. These are equally important in online communication as in person.

## **Making the most of the benefits**

In addition to helping your child stay safe online it's important to help them get the most out of the internet. Younger children especially can benefit from your guidance when it comes to where to go and what to do online. Cerebra's [website](#)(link is external) is a good source of information about online communities, search engines and communication tools that work for children with learning disabilities and autism.

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