

Three top tips for building your child's online resilience



Photo: EladeManu

Recent research suggests that a lot of what we've been told about keeping children safe online may be wrong. In fact, rather than trying to limit young people's exposure to harmful content via filters and restrictions, we should be focusing on helping them build their skills, confidence and creativity.¹ This will make it easier for them to manage their use (to switch off!) and to deal with risks.

You can't shield your child from all risks online, any more than you can offline. But not all those risks have to turn into harm.

To help prevent the harm, young people need to be streetwise online. This is sometimes called digital literacy, and it has three elements:

- technical literacy - knowing your way around technologies and having technical skills;
- media literacy - understanding different platforms and being able to judge the quality and reliability of online sources;
- social literacy - understanding online etiquette and the way things are done online.

As a parent, you may not be a coding whizz and you probably won't be up to speed with all the latest apps, but you may well be able to help your child understand the social side of things, the implications of their online behaviour (that what goes online stays online, for example, or that it's generally bad practice to say something to someone online that you wouldn't say to their face).

Here are our tips for helping your child to regulate their own use and take the more positive approach to the internet that seems to lead to greater safety:

- **Rather than making inflexible rules, have a conversation.** It can be tempting to lay down hard and fast rules - to order your kids not to visit certain websites or to switch all screens by dinner time. But even a child who has no access to a computer at home may be able to surf the web on their phone, a friend's tablet or laptop or even at school, and research shows that children who have very restrictive parents are generally less resilient than their peers. If you'd rather your child didn't use certain websites, the best approach is to explain why. Calmly and rationally

discussing the risks of some online activities can help your children decide for themselves that uploading that picture or clicking on that link isn't worth the risk.

- **Create a supportive environment for exploration and learning.** We know parental support can make a big difference in offline success, but it's now seeming just as crucial to online resilience. Make it clear you support your child seeking out new opportunities. Encourage them to research topics that interest them, use the internet for homework and connect positively with friends and family via social media.
- **Don't be too hands-off.** Giving your children freedom to explore online without excessive restrictions and monitoring is a good thing, but there's no need to jump to the other extreme. Research shows that parental interest and involvement is positively correlated with online resilience, so don't stay completely removed from your child's online life. Ask them to show you their favourite websites, videos and apps, and talk to them about how they interact online. Take a real interest in what they're doing. It is children who feel unconditionally supported (but who have clear boundaries) who feel most secure and tend to be safer.

In other words, a lot of the best strategies for online parenting are very similar to those offline. Most parents are already trying to balance freedoms and rules, to support their children and get involved in their lives. Adding new technology into all that can seem scary, but don't worry too much about the tech; focusing on your child, being interested and supporting them works online too.

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