

Staying Safe Online: Safeguarding and Digital Engagement

Moving services online is crucial when schools are shut, services are less accessible, and children and young people feel an increased need to safely connect and learn.

However, the expansion of digital services increases the risk to children and young people, as some seek to inappropriately access and exploit them online.

This guidance for practitioners supporting children works to establish a safe environment for all those joining online engagement sessions.

This may be the first time you are engaging with children and young people online, and it can be very easy to unintentionally blur the boundaries between your personal and professional digital presence.

Tips for individual practitioners

- **Never share personal contact information.** For example, only use work mobiles and social media accounts linked to your professional organisation.
- **Be mindful that when using multiple accounts online, they can connect.** Log out of personal accounts, and set up accounts with work contact details.
- **Do not accept friend requests on personal accounts from children and young people you are engaging with in a professional setting.** Consider the privacy setting on any personal accounts you have, to reduce the likelihood of this happening.
- **Consider what to do if a young person finds your personal online accounts.** Be transparent with children and young people that the friend request will not be accepted, and inform your line manager of any contact. Do not send private messages to children from your personal account.
- When representing your organisation as part of an online event, be sure to **check your organisation's policy** if you would like to promote the event online.
- **Treat others respectfully.** Do not share information or images of other people and their work without their explicit consent. It might be the case that sharing information about someone's life or engagement places them at risk. For example, you might work with colleagues who have previously fled domestic violence and do not wish to have their organisation or role publicised. Make no assumptions.

Risk Assessment – Core Principles

Risk assessments should form an integral part of planning online participation and engagement sessions, just as it would when planning face-to-face sessions. Consider the following points when writing the risk assessment:

Informed Consent

Informed consent supports children and young people to understand the session content, and raise any potential safeguarding matters before the session. It also provides the opportunity for you to have the child's and parents' / carers' contact details, should this information be required after the session.

Ensure there is informed consent from all participants to take part in the online activity.

Informed consent should include consent to participate, as well as consent for any other aspect, such as using work produced in the session.

In most instances, it is important to have parents / carers of those under 16 years old to countersign the consent form.

Where it is not possible to receive signed forms, provide an alternative way to share information with parents / carers. For example, a video call to record informed consent.

Data and Privacy

Data and privacy are fundamental aspects of keeping safe online.

The forum chosen should ensure that personal information, such as location, is not available for all to see.

Children and young people should be supported to consider how they wish to be safely represented. This may mean having only their first name viewable, and / or their video turned off.

Age restrictions

Children under the age of 13 years should not have social media accounts.

Consider how their parents and carers will be engaged in the session and work with them, so they can access the planned activity.

Accessibility

- Is the platform being used accessible for the children and young people you are hoping to engage?
- Is the platform supported by your organisation's ICT and privacy policy?
- Will there be a child friendly 'how to' guide before the session so no one feels left behind?

Closed groups

Closed groups on social media are a common way of engaging with a group of children and young people. They allow the administrator greater control over who can join and access the material.

Transparency

It is important to maintain transparency throughout the session.

Consider having two professionals facilitate, or include parents and carers (especially of younger children). This means that what is said and done in the group will be seen by more than one adult, enabling greater support for you and the children and young people taking part.

Customarily, facilitators should not meet with children alone via online channels. However, we recognise that there may be times when practitioners are working with children on a one-to-one basis, either planned or unexpectedly. In order to keep interactions safe in these instances, practitioners should:

- Let others know about the sessions, by updating work calendars and informing line managers.
- Consider linking in with the parents / carers beforehand, not only as part of the informed consent process, but also to agree where they will be during the session. They may agree to join for part or all of the session, or remain in the room next door. Inform parents / carers of how they can raise any concerns they have about the session, for example with a service manager.
- Consider how you create a shared space agreement with the child or young person at the start of the session, so that they know what to expect, they understand the actions you will take should there be a child protection concern, and they know what to do if they feel uncomfortable or have a concern.
- Record the session immediately afterwards, including details such as the date, time and content headlines.

Supporting Adults

Depending on your relationship with the children and young people, it may be important to have supporting adults within the session who know the children.

For example, if you are working with a group of school children that you do not know, it is helpful to have a professional from the school join. This means that if something such as a child protection concern arises within the session, there is an adult who knows the child and their support network available to support your response.

Safeguarding Prompts

Consider the set-up of the session and inform participants of it well before. Is it a video call? If so, ensure that where possible professionals, children and young people are not being filmed in their bedrooms, and that everyone is dressed appropriately. Where this is not possible, suggest that bedroom doors are kept open or that others in the household are nearby.

As with most workshops and training, start the session with a group agreement. Empower children and young people to share their dos and don'ts (i.e. expectations

for the session and from each other). This provides an opportunity for the group leader to share the safeguarding measures for the session, and inform children what you will do if you are concerned.

Do not promise confidentiality as this may need to be broken in the event of a child protection issue.

Accountability, and what to do if you are worried about a child's welfare

Being online can make it harder for everyone to be held accountable for their actions. Individuals can sometimes feel safer to share inappropriate and harmful comments, or disclose difficulties they are experiencing. Children and young people may disclose abuse.

During this challenging time for everyone in society, you need to be ready to be held to account for the actions you will take in response. This includes knowing what action will be taken if a child protection issue occurs.

Use the [risk assessment](#) for the session to clearly outline what will be done if action is required.

The CFC team strongly recommends the following action where necessary:

- If someone is in immediate danger or requires urgent medical assistance, contact emergency services via 999.
- Where a child or young person has shared a child protection concern but is not in immediate danger, contact your local authority's children's services department to make a referral as soon as the concern is known. If you do not know the local authority's details, contact the NSPCC on 0808 800 5000.
- Where a child or young person has said something that requires follow up outside of the session, such as a request for more information about a service, link in with that child's supporting adult, for example their teacher.
- Record and inform your line manager of any issues that arise during the session. Ensure that you too are supported.

Individuals can come across distressing or problematic images of people they do not know. It is important that you refer the concern to the appropriate organisation.

For more information, visit:

[The Child Exploitation and Online Protection command](#)

[Unicef's guide for young people to reporting and safety online](#)

[NSPCC Online Safety for Organisations and Groups](#)

[UK Safer Internet Centre](#)

[BASW Digital Capabilities for Social Workers](#)