

CHATTING ONLINE AND CHILD SAFETY

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS ON HOW TO HELP CHILDREN KEEP SAFE WHILE CHATTING

CHILDREN AND CHATTING

CHAT: WHAT IS IT?

The internet offers great opportunities to interact and communicate with friends and people from all over the world. Chatting over the Internet can be done with a group of people in a chatroom, or with the person you are playing an online game against. As well as being able to add your comments to a conversation ongoing in a chatroom or online game between a number of people, it is also usually possible to chat privately to one person in these environments.

Chatrooms can be accessed on mobile phones as well as computers and other online devices, and chat can be provided by Internet Service Providers (ISPs), such as BT or Wanadoo, or Portals such as Yahoo, or in fact by anyone with a website.

WHY DO CHILDREN LOVE CHATTING?

The communication is in real time (in other words it is instantaneous), and it is the fast-moving nature of this communication, and the anonymity that it allows which forms part of the attraction for children. In a chatroom, you can be whoever you want to be and it gives the chance for experimenting and expression with less inhibition and more risk-taking than perhaps there would be in the real world. Although this can be great fun, it does also have its negative side.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS?

There are potential risks in communicating to people that you don't know, and unfortunately some children have been hurt having gone to meet the 'friends' they have made online. Adults with a sexual interest in children have used chatrooms and other interactive areas online to make contact with and befriend children, and then 'groomed' them, ie persuaded and manipulated them to meet up where they have been abused.

There have also been cases of children being bullied or threatened online in chat environments.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This document aims to help parents and carers in their understanding of what good practice is in the provision of chat services¹, to help them help their children find 'good' chatrooms and to be aware of how to chat safely.

This document is a summary of the good practice models and guidance for the internet industry published by the Home Office Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet on chat services as well as on moderation². The original documents were chiefly aimed at chat providers (as well as Instant Messaging and other web-based services providers) to make them aware of what good practice is, but this information is also relevant to parents and carers to help them know what makes a good service, enabling them to identify such a service for their children to use.

¹ See http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/operational-policing/ho_model.pdf?view=Binary

² See <http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/operational-policing/moderation.pdf?view=Binary>



A PARENTS GUIDE TO WHAT MAKES A 'GOOD' CHATROOM AND HOW TO CHAT SAFELY

There are some key components to a 'good' chatroom, and these include safety advice, safety tools such as moderation and ignore/block buttons, and reporting mechanisms.

1) SAFETY ADVICE

KEY QUESTION:

Where can I find out how to use a particular chat service safely?



It is good practice for the chat provider to provide the user with information about how to keep safe while chatting/using their service. And this information should be easy to find.

If you cannot see or find such advice, then e-mail the chat service provider or change to a chatroom where such information is provided.

There should be key safety messages about how to keep safe while chatting, but the advice should also explain the safety features of the chat service and how they work, for example:

- the type of moderation in place and how it works,
- how to use the ignore or block buttons (to block other users), and
- how to report something to the chat provider or moderator and what to report.

It is important that you familiarise yourself with the chat service's safety features, whether it be a chatroom or online game with chat facility.

KEY QUESTION:

How do I chat safely?



The chat provider should also provide links to other online safety guides so that if you want to find out more about keeping safe you can. Such sites include www.chatdanger.com, www.thinkuknow.co.uk, www.websafecrackers.com, and www.internetsafetyzone.co.uk.



THE SMART RULES³ – HOW TO STAY SAFE WHILE CHATTING

It is important that your children know how to stay in control online. The SMART rules will enable children to be safe and be smart online.

- S Safe:** Keep safe by being careful not to give out your personal information - such as your name, e-mail, home address or school name, phone number - to people online.
- M Meeting:** Meeting someone you have only been in touch with online can be dangerous. If you feel that you 'have to' meet, then for your own safety you must tell you parent or carer and take them with you – at least on the first visit.
- A Accepting:** Accepting emails, messages on IM or opening files, pictures or texts from people you don't really know or trust can lead to problems – they may contain viruses which can wreck your computer, or nasty messages and images.
- R Reliable:** Remember that people online may not be who they say they are, and so online 'friends' are really strangers, no matter how many times you have chatted with them, unless you know and trust them in the 'offline world.'
- T Tell:** Tell your parent or carer if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or worried.

Some further safety tips are given throughout this guide.

2) MODERATION

KEY QUESTIONS:

- Is the chat moderated?
- How is it moderated?



Moderation is an activity or process whereby a person or technical filter is responsible for reviewing content posted by users. It is used to try and help keep chat and public interactive services safe for children and provide a positive user experience by removing unsafe, inappropriate and offensive posts. Although the fact that a service is moderated is not a guarantee of a child's safety, it does provide an important service to improve the environment

There are different ways in which moderation can be carried out. **Technical moderation** is a computer software system that automatically filters out words and phrases from the chat environment that it has been programmed to identify, such as swear words or personal details such as e-mail addresses or phone numbers.

Human moderation is where the content posted by a user is reviewed by an individual, and this moderator can for example remove inappropriate posts or even bar a user from using a service. Human moderation can be done in different ways, and these different ways have implications as to the level of safety. With **Pre-moderation** all material is seen and checked before it is published. Though this has an implication on the speed of the communication it is potentially the safest form of moderation and is perhaps well-suited for younger children.

³ The SMART rules and the other safety tips given in this guide are taken from www.chatdanger.com, a site run by Childnet International.



With **post-moderation**, all the content is reviewed after it is published/posted, and the moderator will remove the post if it clearly breaks the rules of the chat service (such as the posting of personal information). **Sample post-moderation** reviews a sample of the material posted, and the moderator will patrol a number of interactive spaces.

With **Reactive moderation**, a moderator is on hand to respond when requested to do so by a user.

It is good practice for providers of chat environments to provide clear and prominent information about whether the service is moderated or not, and what kind of moderation is used.

Technical moderation can provide a useful compliment to human moderation, in assisting with the removal of inappropriate posts. However, to date technical moderation has not shown that it can provide the same level of child protection as human moderation.

SAFETY TIP

Whatever the system of moderation that is being used, make sure you know how to contact the moderator in case you need to report a problem and the system is not working.

3) PROFILES

KEY QUESTION:

What information is included in profiles?



A profile, or member directory entry, is a page which gives more information about particular users in a chat environment. If you wanted to find out more information about the person you are chatting with or people in the chatroom you are using, you can look at their profile to find out more. Similarly, your profile is a source of information about yourself to other users.

It is good practice for chat providers to give advice about what information to include in profiles, and to make the chat users aware that any information given here is publicly available to the other users of the chat service.

SAFETY TIP

Once you have started using a chatroom, check your profile to make sure it does not include any personal information such as name, address, mobile number, e-mail address, photo etc). Consider using a cartoon or icon instead of a photo of yourself in your profile.

4) BLOCK/IGNORE BUTTONS

KEY QUESTION:

What can I do if someone is making me feel uncomfortable?





It is good practice for chat providers to give prominence to safety tools for their users. Block or ignore buttons can ensure that you don't see messages from a particular person anymore or receive private messages from them. This can be of use if someone is making you feel uncomfortable in a chat environment.

SAFETY TIP

If blocking someone is not effective, then remember you can get away from an unpleasant situation by leaving the chatroom altogether or by changing your screen name.

5) REPORTING

KEY QUESTION:

How can I report a failure in the service or inappropriate behaviour by another user?

If someone is breaking the 'rules' of a chat service you can report them to the chat service provider or moderator. It is good practice for a chat provider to have a clear and accessible reporting system for the chat user, and inform the user of the response he/she can expect and a time frame for this.

If you want to report suspicious behaviour online with or towards a child, then you can make a report online to the police at www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com/contactus/vgt.

SAFETY TIP

Learn how to keep/save a copy of the conversation in chat – this may be useful if you want to report something.

6) REGISTRATION

KEY QUESTION:

What information is required to register to enter a chat service?

In order to enter a chatroom or other service using chat, it is usually necessary to register. It is good practice for the personal information required at this point not to be more extensive than is necessary. And the purpose for gathering this information and the uses to which it may be put, should be clearly and prominently explained.

SAFETY TIP

During registration, you will need to choose a username or screen name, the name that others will see in the chat environment. It is important to use a nickname, not your real name, and a nickname that is not going to attract the wrong type of attention.