



**Ambitious
about Autism**



Staying safe online guide

myVoice

Introduction

Lots of young people spend many hours online – the online world can provide information on hobbies, forums for playing games, chat rooms, social media sites and lots of different ways for young people with autism to access the things they love and, to talk to people who share the same interests. Because so many young people with autism have told us that the online world provides them with a lot of positive experiences, it is important that young people know how to use the internet safely.

The internet is often credited with opening up social opportunities to people with autism. However, as well as providing new opportunities, the internet can pose risks to people with autism. We hope that this guide will help inform you of possible risks to look out for, what things might be potentially unsafe and how to deal with any problems online.

Young people with autism have told us that they can find it difficult to understand social rules and norms, and the online world contains many social media sites and places which often have their own unwritten rules. The aim of this guide is to equip you, as young people with autism, to feel confident and happy when you go online.

This guide will cover issues such as bullying and harassment online as well as how to talk to people on different social media sites by highlighting some of the positive aspects of going online. When Ambitious about Autism started putting together this guide, we talked to several young people with autism and their experiences and views inform the topics in this guide.

There are many internet safety guides online – this one does not cover every aspect of internet safety because it is designed specifically to highlight issues that young people with autism told us were most important to them when they go online.



Who this guide is for

Although this is a guide for children and young people – we know that there is a difference in the interests and experiences of children (those under 16) and of young people who are aged 16 - 25.


This guide is mainly aimed at young people aged 16 to 25 and as such, it deals more with the types of issues that young adults may encounter when they are using the internet for research or socialising.

We recommend that any children using the internet are supervised at all times and that anyone under the age of 16 (or their parents) have a look at this government advice sheet on children's internet safety:

[This government advice sheet.](#)

Positives of the internet for autistic young people

Before we talk about some of the dangers and risks associated with using the internet, it's important to acknowledge that the internet has also created countless positive opportunities for young people with autism. We spoke to some young people with autism to ask them why they think the online world is good for autistic young people and they had lots to say. Below is a list of things young people with autism told us were particularly good about the internet.

- Other forms of communication can be difficult for autistic young people. Many people with autism do not like talking on the phone and can find it hard in social situations such as parties to initiate and maintain conversations.
 - Communicating with people on the internet means that conversations are written down, which has the benefit of giving young people with autism extra time to process information. Processing verbal language can often be difficult for autistic people so communicating in writing and being able to reply in your own time allows time for processing and understanding information.
 - The internet and social media forums are a really good tool for finding and connecting with other autistic people, or with people who share the same interests.
 - The internet enables many autistic young people to stay in touch with friends and family – one young person told us that they find it very hard to speak on the phone but are much more able to type emails/messages online or use Skype to connect with friends and family.
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- Skype was mentioned as a useful tool by several young people because they find it easier to communicate with someone when they can see them. Using the telephone can be much harder as you only have verbal information and for someone with autism, it can be easier to understand meaning and process what someone else is saying if you can see their facial expressions.
 - Turn-taking is less of an issue with online chats as there is a natural time lapse when people are typing messages. One young person said it can be very difficult to know when it is your turn to speak when you are physically talking to someone. Communicating online provides more obvious pauses and opportunities to respond to something that someone has said.
 - The internet cuts out the need for 'small talk'. You don't have to do it online to find out someone's interests – you just go to the pages or forums that are already focussed on specific topics.

Case study

“I particularly enjoy socialising through Facebook groups on a common interest - everyone already knows why you're there, so it cuts out the issue of navigating awkward introductions. One of my favourite groups at the moment was set up by members of my undergraduate university's Doctor Who society, but has grown to include a lot of people I haven't met in person. It's a great way of keeping in touch with old friends and getting to know some new people too, and I appreciate being able to engage others in my special interest without worrying I'm going too far!”



- It's easier to meet people in real life after first getting to know them online because you already know each other and have already connected over the same interests.
- Many people with autism have a 'special interest' and the internet has a wealth of information about all special interests (whatever it is).

Case study

“When I was younger I became extremely interested in space and wanted to learn all I could about it. I became very interested in a space mission that NASA was launching and had many questions about it and the work of NASA in general (as well as how I could become an astronaut). Despite my Mum and the local librarian trying to find information for me, my questions started to become too specialised and they were no longer able to find answers. As a result I ended up setting up my first email account aged four and emailing NASA directly with a list of questions. I heard back from a scientist directly involved in the space mission and corresponded with NASA for a while. I got to speak to scientists, people training to be astronauts and engineers on everything from light years, planets and gravity to the food eaten in space and what I needed to do to become an astronaut. It really allowed me to develop my special interest and speak to people directly involved in something that wouldn't have been possible without using the internet. ”



Lots of young people use the internet for research: it may be for a college or university essay or for general work purposes. It is really important to remember to check the factuality of the sources of information. For example, if you use information in an essay that you got from Wikipedia, you should also check it elsewhere.

Remember that anyone can update and edit Wikipedia pages and there is no way of verifying who those people are or, where they got their information from. Also be aware that there are 'fake news' sites

out there so if you are looking for actual facts and 'news' it is best to use trusted sites – for example, BBC News site – as this has been established for many years and is part of the BBC.

Google Books is a great tool for checking information as it holds electronic copies of many published text books. This is almost like going to the actual library – just online!

<https://books.google.com/>

Google Scholar is also really helpful for anyone doing research for an essay or school or college work. It is a large collection of academic articles and literature:

<https://scholar.google.co.uk/>

Here is an article about how both those sites work and why they are more trustworthy than using general Google or sites such as Wikipedia:

<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/where-to-research-material-for-your-homework/>

Recognising bullying, harassment and abuse online

It's easy to think that online bullying is just done by people you don't know. However, bullying online can be committed by people you already know, as well as strangers. We hear a lot in the news about 'trolls' and people who hide behind an account or a fake profile who harass and bully other people. Although this does happen, you are just as likely to be bullied online by someone you actually know in real life.

Internet or virtual life and 'real life' can become blurred but a good general rule to remember is 'if you wouldn't talk to someone like that in real life, then don't talk to them like that online.' The same applies to how someone is speaking to you online. For example, if someone is teasing you or talking to you in a way that makes you feel upset, hurt or sad, then that is not OK. Online actions have real-life consequences. Any 'real' friends – whether you know them in real life or not – will not purposefully put anything online that could upset or hurt your feelings or which would be seen as 'bullying' or 'harassment'.

A 'troll' is someone who deliberately posts provocative or upsetting messages with the intention of causing lots of people to argue back or to cause upset. It is best not to respond at all to trolls.

Blackmail is when someone demands you give them something like money or your bank details and says that if you don't do it, they will tell someone you care or post online about something bad or embarrassing you have done. This can happen if you have revealed some personal information about yourself to that person or if you have shared very intimate pictures of yourself with them.

If you are confused or unsure if someone is bullying you then there is more information on this website which could help you: <https://www.ditchthelabel.org/>

Online gaming risks

Many young people with autism are members of online gaming communities. People can spend hours playing their favourite games online. However, this means that lots of people of all ages can be playing the game at the same time.

Many online games include the option of talking in real time (by text or microphone) to the other players on the game, who may range from two to two thousand! Many of these games include playing against others (in teams or individually), and the activities in the game may lead to comments being made that could be seen as 'abusive' but could also be seen as 'banter' or a joke in reaction to something that's happened in the game. However, each person's tolerance levels for 'banter' and swearing are different; it's important to know what your own levels and thresholds are for 'online banter'. Some people might not mean to be hurtful, but that doesn't mean they're not being hurtful in practice. Lots of bullies (offline and online) sometimes try and disguise their bullying as being "just a joke", which is particularly harmful for autistic people who may have difficulty understanding some jokes and/or get told that they

don't have a sense of humour! That means that if you feel hurt by 'online banter' it is OK to say so or to leave the conversation.

To learn more about identifying when you or someone else is being bullied or harassed during an online game, check out this guide:

<https://www.ditchthelabel.org/gaming-and-bullying/>



How to use your privacy settings on social media and how to block or 'unfriend' someone

It is really important that you know how to use your privacy settings on each social media site you use. How you set up your privacy settings can really make a difference to your experience and enjoyment of social media sites. It's also important to know how you can block someone on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc in case someone has become abusive towards you. The following links lead to detailed guides about how to use your privacy settings on each main social media sites.

Snapchat

[Privacy guide](#)



Twitter

[Privacy guide](#)



Facebook

[Privacy guide](#)



Instagram

[Privacy guide](#)



All of the above guides are from the UK Safer Internet Centre – you can find their general website here:

<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/>

How much personal information to share online

There are some general rules to follow to make sure you stay safe online, and particularly when it comes to sharing information about yourself. The following are some key points to remember when posting online:

- Don't give out your home address on social media.
- Don't put your telephone number online.
- Don't tell people your date of birth.
- Don't give out your email address.
- Don't tell people where you go to school or college.
- Try not to use your real name (some sites like Facebook may insist on your real name and people also use real names on Twitter a lot but if talking to new people or strangers in chat rooms it is best not to use your real name).



It is really important to keep personal information private. Personal information like your full name, address, phone number and date of birth are things you use for bank accounts. If anyone online asks you for any of this type of personal information, do not to give it out. You may get an email or a text request from someone claiming to be your bank. They may ask you for things like your date of birth or address to verify your account but if your bank really does need to contact you then they already have this information. If you receive any requests from someone claiming to be your bank and you are not sure if it is a genuine email from them, it is best to go into your local branch of your bank to ask them if they have tried contacting you recently. If you would like to know more about staying safe financially, please go to the following link:

<http://www.personalsafetyadvice.co.uk/financialsafetyontheinternet.html>



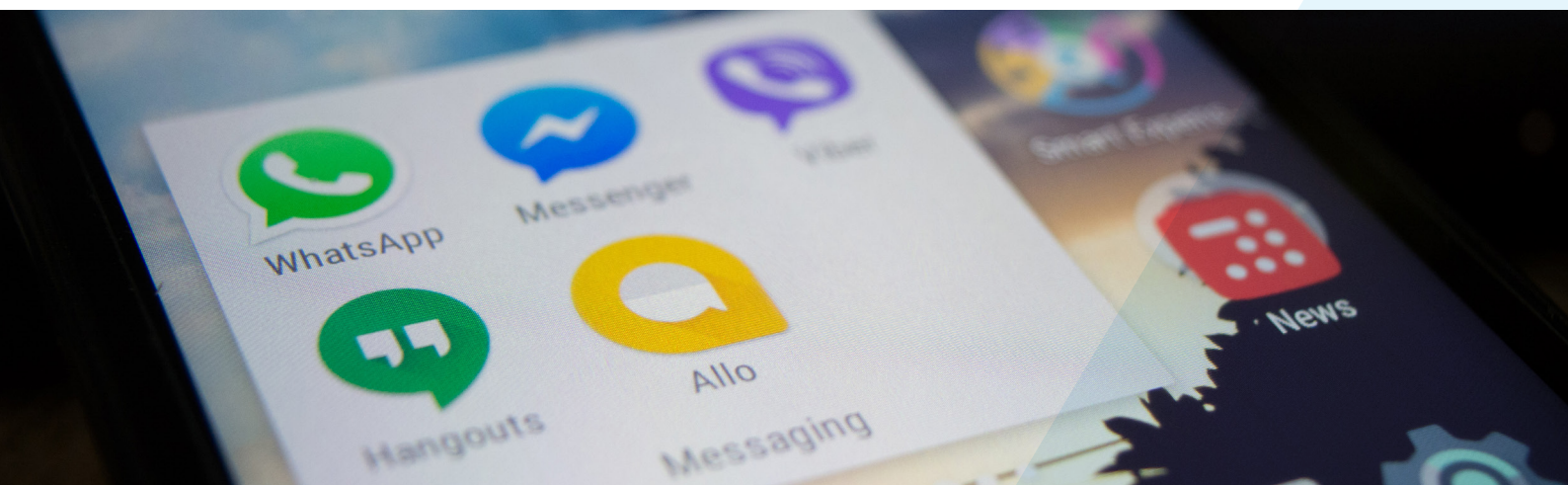
Assessing whether someone on social media is who they say they are/online dating

You have to be aware that although most people online are who they say they are, there are also fake accounts or accounts set up by people pretending to be someone else. This may particularly happen on online dating sites and if you are thinking of joining any online dating sites, please read this guide about the potential risks and how to stay safe:

<https://www.getsafeonline.org/protecting-yourself/online-dating/>

Some things to look out for that might indicate that someone isn't really who they say they are:

- Check someone's profile picture – is it of a real person? Are there any other photos on their account that show the same person?
- If they tell you not to tell anyone else about them or to keep things 'secret'.
- If they say they are your age but then use language that seems odd or unusual for a young person.
- If they start telling you they are 'in trouble' or in an unfortunate situation which means they need money to get out of it. Reports of fraudsters trying to get money from people on online dating sites are quite frequent. Never send or transfer money to someone you've met online.



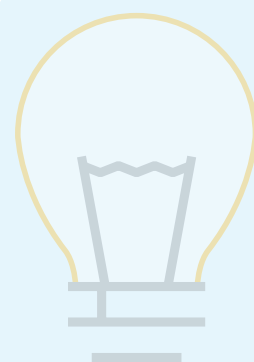
Who to add to your social media accounts/ what types of people will see your different social media accounts

Before you add someone to your Facebook or Snapchat (for example), it is important to think about what kinds of things you post on your account and who you are happy to share that content with. Here are a few tips for different sites:

- It is generally a good rule to stick to on Facebook not to add anyone who you have a professional relationship with. This means someone you may work with or a teacher or tutor at college. If you are at college or university your tutors and teachers have a professional relationship with you. If they try and add you on Facebook, this is unusual and if you don't know what to do, speak to someone you trust (for example, a parent or close friend).
- Facebook accounts usually contain more personal posts – it is usual to put up personal pictures of yourself and your friends or family on holiday or at home – so you should only add people on Facebook who you know in real life or are happy for them to see personal pictures or opinions.
- Twitter is a more public social media forum. If you have a Twitter account then anyone in the public domain can see it. That is why a lot of famous people are known on Twitter and sometimes you might see news stories about someone famous getting into an argument with someone they don't even know on Twitter. You can use your real name (lots of people do) or you can just use your first name or type anything you want in the box.
- Even though Twitter is more public, that does not mean it is OK for people to post abusive or inappropriate things on your Twitter. For example – you may have people following your Twitter account who are your teachers or who you work with. That does not mean that it is OK for them to post inappropriate comments on your Twitter. For example, if a teacher posts something rude or swears at you on Twitter – that is not OK.
- Although it is much more acceptable to have 'professional' contacts on your Twitter, you may still want to block them if they are being inappropriate or making you feel uncomfortable. You have the option of making your Twitter account private (sometimes called "locking" because it shows a padlock symbol by your name) - this means other people have to request to follow you, and only your followers can see your tweets.
- Although college and university are very different to school – and tutors there treat you much more like an adult, if they ask to be on your Facebook or your Twitter and this makes you feel uncomfortable then just say no. 'If in doubt, don't.'
- You have the right to state your own preferences so if a tutor at college asks you to communicate with them on Twitter (for example) and you don't feel happy about this, then just tell them you would rather not. You have the right to suggest alternative ways to contact a tutor or work colleague – ie. through emails
- If something happens online that you are upset about or it just doesn't feel right but you are worried about it – tell someone. Even if you feel worried about getting into trouble with your parents or you feel embarrassed – it is better to tell someone. People who care about you like your parents or friends would always rather you told them
- Be careful about sharing photographs of others. It may be that you have been out somewhere with a group of people and you all took a photo together – don't assume that everyone in that photograph is happy for the picture to be posted on a social media site. It is always best to ask people before you share photos of them to get their permission.
- Don't tell stories about other people online unless you have asked them first. Even if you are posting in a place where that person won't see it – you should not share the details of other peoples' lives in public forums unless they have given you permission to do so.

Our top tips

- It is important to remember that you should communicate in different ways to different audiences.
- **Never accept a teacher or tutor or a work boss as a friend on Facebook.**
- Always avoid giving out personal details.
- **Don't keep a list of passwords in one document or, if you do, then you should encrypt or password protect that document.**
- If meeting an online friend in real life always make sure you take someone else along – especially if it is the first time you are meeting the online friend
- **If you have previously met your online friend in real life and are going to meet them again, tell someone you trust where you are going, what time you will be out to and by what time you will contact them to say that you are back home.**
- Don't hack into sites – even if you can and you are curious. It is illegal.
- Don't talk about college/ university or work situations or teachers/ bosses online as this can put you at risk if other people from college or work read it.
- **If you have a job – don't add your manager on Facebook.**
- Don't believe everything you read on other people's social media accounts – people only post what they want others to know and may exaggerate or lie. Most people only post about the good things in their life and not the difficult things, so remember that you are not usually getting a balanced picture of someone's life.
- **Pick your battles and try not to get into arguments online.**
- Do not swear at people online – even if you are arguing about a topic that you disagree on – always remain respectful.
- **Don't worry about how many Facebook 'friends' you have. Virtual friends aren't always real friends.**
- Don't tell people online when you are on holiday or when you are going to be away from home (this is because criminals will know your house is empty, putting your property at risk).
- **If you are part of a group chat (for example, on Whatsapp) but you don't like the conversation or people are using it to gossip about other people, you can leave that group. It is OK to leave the group – do not worry about what the rest of the group thinks.**
- Do not share any explicit photos that you might be sent – it is illegal to share explicit pictures of underage young people (anyone under 16) and even if they are not underage, you should never share any explicit photos of other people.



Danger signs

- If something doesn't feel right or someone has asked you something that makes you feel uncomfortable, say 'no'.
Remember that you ALWAYS have the right to say no.
- If someone asks you for a picture of yourself, it should generally only be for the purpose of recognising you if you are planning to meet for the first time in real life.
- If someone keeps asking you for pictures of yourself, especially if they ask for pictures where you are not wearing a lot of clothes – do not send them any pictures and immediately talk to someone you trust for advice.
- If someone you've met online says something one day and then another day they say something that doesn't match up with what they said previously, it could be a sign that they are lying.
- If something seems 'too good to be true' then be wary.
- Be wary of anyone setting up multiple accounts. If someone doesn't have much history or many photographs of themselves on their account, then it may be a fake account.



Visit the below website to read definitions of what cyberbullying is, what effect cyberbullying has and what to do if you are experiencing cyberbullying. This page covers the topic of bullying on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat.

<http://www.bullying.co.uk/cyberbullying/what-is-cyberbullying/>

General websites about online safety:

<http://www.childnet.com/resources/star-toolkit>

<http://www.autism.org.uk/staying-safe-online>

This is a really good website which covers all areas of online safety such as: personal safety, online dating, financial safety, virus threats, online gaming, and much more: <https://www.getsafeonline.org/>






Pears National Centre
for Autism Education,
Woodside Avenue,
London N10 3JA


Tel 020 8815 5444

Email info@ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk

Web ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk

 @ambitiousautism

 /ambitiousaboutautism

 @ambitiousaboutautism

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