

SAFE & SMART

Supporting children and young people with SEND online

Oaklands School



"The best for all, the best from all"



IN THIS EDITION

01

Familiar
feels true

02

Permissions
and privacy

03

When a toy
talks back

Welcome



Have you ever read something online and thought, “That must be true, I’ve seen it everywhere”? Something can feel true because we have seen it before, even if nobody has checked it. This can happen to adults as well as children.

In this edition, we’ll look at ways to check online stories together. We’ll also explain why apps ask to use things such as the microphone, and look at AI toys that can talk with children. There are two useful resources for you to try at home.

The internet can help your child enjoy an interest, stay in touch with friends and communicate in a way that works for them. As you know, every child needs different support. Some of these ideas may help your family. Others may not. Choose what suits your child’s interests and understanding, while respecting their age and the things they can do for themselves.

You don’t need to read everything at once. Start with the section that interests you most.

When familiar starts to feel true



Imagine seeing a photograph of a bright-blue rabbit. The words underneath say a new kind of rabbit has been discovered. You're not sure. Then another account shares a similar picture. Later, a third posts about it, with hundreds of likes and comments saying they've seen it too.

This is a made-up example. Nobody has shown any evidence that the discovery is real. Yet by the third post, it might feel a little easier to believe.

This is called the illusory truth effect. It means that seeing or hearing something again can make it feel more true. One possible reason is that familiar information is easier for our brains to take in. We may mistake that familiar feeling for a reason to believe it.

A review published in February 2026 looked at 182 studies involving more than 31,000 people. Overall, repeated information seemed slightly more believable. The results varied between studies.

Hearing something again doesn't mean we will believe it. The research also doesn't show that all children with SEND are more likely to believe false information. A diagnosis alone cannot tell us how someone will respond.

DID YOU KNOW?

Even knowing the answer may not be enough

Researchers have found that hearing a false statement again can make it seem more true, even when people already know the right answer. What we know still helps, but we don't always stop to think about it. Adults can practise checking alongside children. It isn't a test of how clever someone is.

Why we keep seeing similar posts



Social media apps use what we watch, like and share to help choose which posts to show us next. This can help us find more things we enjoy. It can also mean seeing the same story again and again. Features that keep us watching give us more chances to see it.

When we keep seeing similar views and stories, people sometimes call this a “filter bubble”. We see more of the same, instead of a wider mix.

Three accounts might all be repeating one story that nobody has checked. Seeing it on three accounts doesn’t make it true. Neither does a familiar face or thousands of likes.

Your child may know a lot about a favourite subject. Ask them to show you where they find information about it. You could choose one new fact to check together. This is a way to share their interest, without making them feel that enjoying it is a problem.

Why it matters

False information can hurt real people. In September, the RNLI, the lifeboat charity, said false information about its work had led to abuse of its volunteers and staff. Some happened online. Some involved physical abuse. We hear about similar things all too often. It shows why checking a story before sharing it matters.

Misinformation means information that is wrong or gives the wrong idea. Disinformation means information used to mislead people on purpose. Someone who shares a false story may believe it is true.

Artificial intelligence, or AI, adds another difficulty. It can make pictures, voices and videos that look or sound real. A picture doesn’t need to look strange to be made up. A real picture can also have false words underneath it. We need to check the story, not just how the picture looks.

[Research: repetition and belief](#)

[Read the RNLI statement](#)

[Childnet: support for families](#)

Take checking one step at a time



Some children find it hard to understand a message when the meaning isn't clear. "Don't believe everything you see" may not tell them what to do. You could say, "This post says something. We haven't checked it yet."

You could try these steps together. Use words or pictures, or show your child what to do:

- Pause before sharing the post or doing what it says.
- Show it to someone you trust, or use your usual way to ask for help.
- Check together where the information came from.

Use the same reminder, but try it with different examples. Your child might check a post about a hobby on their own, but want help with a worrying message about school.

Give your child time to answer before asking another question. They might speak, type, sign, point or use a device that helps them communicate.

Make sure they have a way to say "I'm not sure", as well as "yes" or "no". It's fine for you to say "I'm not sure" too. You can find out together.

When a post has caused worry

Start with how your child feels. You could say, "That sounds worrying. Let's look together." This shows that you understand their worry without saying the story is true.

You don't need to find the answer straight away. If your child needs a break, explain what will happen next. For example, "I'll ask your teacher, and we'll talk again after school." Only promise something you can do.

When you find the answer, explain it clearly. Show your child what helped you check it. You could keep a short note or picture to remind you both.

If your child keeps checking the same thing and becomes upset, ask someone who already supports them for help. Together, you can agree how to respond.

Using the blue rabbit example



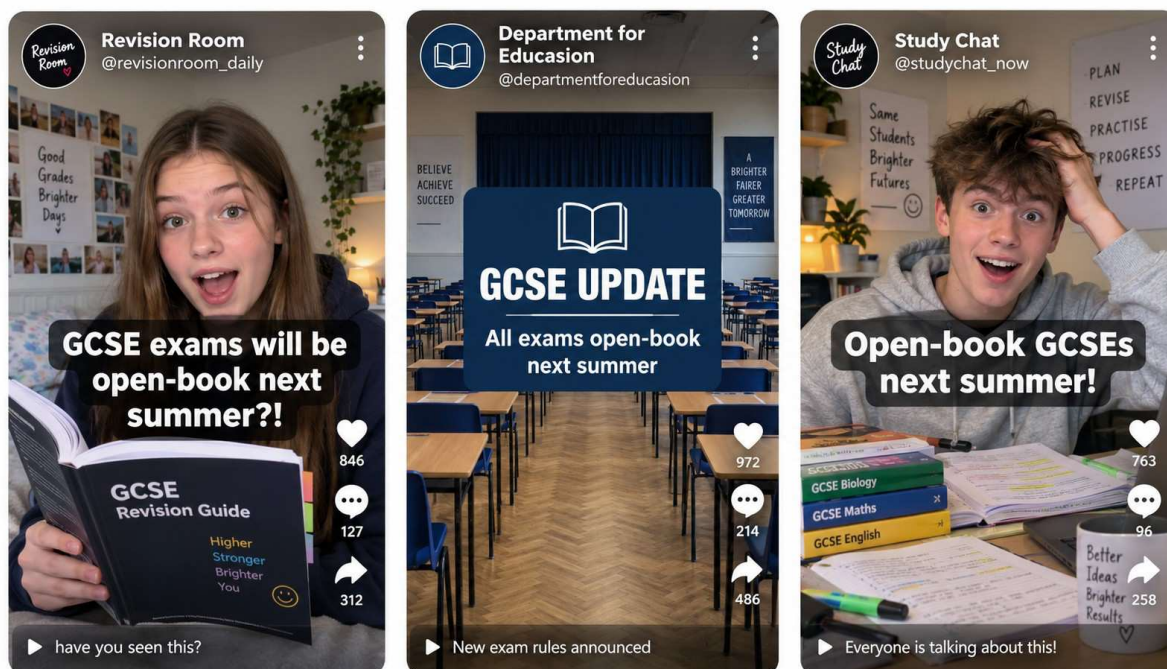
If the rabbit example suits your child, explain that the posts are made up. Show one picture first. Then show the others. You might say, “This is a picture of an imaginary rabbit. Other accounts have shared similar pictures.”

Ask one question at a time. “Does sharing a picture make the animal real?” If that is hard to understand, show what you mean: “I can show you this picture three times. The discovery is still made up.”

Show how you would check. You could look at a natural history museum’s website, a wildlife website or do an online search together. When searching, look at who has provided the answer, rather than trusting the first result, as AI answers can be wrong, too. Finish with a clear answer: the blue-rabbit discovery in this example was made up.

If a made-up example would confuse or worry your child, choose a real fact about something they enjoy. Show how you checked whether it was right.

An example for a young person taking exams



Imagine a rumour that next summer's GCSE exams will all be open-book. This means pupils could use books or notes during the exam. Several videos repeat the rumour. One account looks as though it belongs to an official education organisation.

If your child understands "imagine if" examples and is comfortable talking about exams, ask where they would check this rumour. They could ask their teacher or the staff who organise exams at school. They could also check the website of the exam board, the organisation that sets their exams.

If talking about changes to exams would worry your child, choose something else. You could check when a game is coming out or when a place they want to visit is open. Choose something that suits their age and interests, even if they need a lot of help with the checking.

An official-looking name or logo doesn't prove a post is true. Show how to go straight to the organisation's own website. A screenshot, which is a picture of a screen, may not show what the organisation really said.

What are we agreeing to when we tap Allow?



An app asks to use the microphone. Your child wants to get on with what they were doing, so they tap Allow. That's an easy habit for any of us to develop.

A permission request is an app asking to use part of your phone or tablet, such as the microphone, camera or photos. There may be a good reason. An app needs the microphone to record a voice message. Ask yourself, "Does it need this for what we want to do?"

Start with something your child uses

Choose an app you know. Look at one permission together. You could say, "Allow lets this app use the microphone so you can record your voice." Point to the microphone picture and show what happens, if that helps.

Turning a permission off isn't always the best choice. Your child may use their voice to control an app, or use photos to communicate. Check what they need before making changes. If the school looks after the device, ask the school about settings you don't understand.

If an app is helping you change a photo, see whether you can let it use just that photo. It may not need access to all your pictures.

If it asks for your location, it wants to know where the device is. Check why. Finding a nearby shop and telling other people where you are are different things.

Sometimes you can choose to allow access only while using the app. The choices vary between devices and apps. You don't need to change everything at once.

Practise without a rush



A message that suddenly appears on the screen can be hard to understand. Look at one together when you have time. Explain one choice, then wait for a response. A screenshot can help you look at the words without having to press anything.

You might agree that a request your child hasn't seen before means "pause and show me". Choose a way they can do this. They could bring you the device, point to a picture or send you a message.

Older young people may prefer to look at a saved explanation and ask for help when they need it. If you're unsure too, you can ask someone you trust to help you both.

Before changing a setting, explain what you are doing. Try the app together afterwards. Check that the parts your child needs still work.

Finding the settings

On an iPhone or iPad:

1. Open Settings.
2. Choose Privacy & Security.
3. Choose Microphone or Camera to see which apps have asked to use it.

On many Android phones and tablets:

1. Open Settings.
2. Choose Apps, then the app's name.
3. Choose Permissions.

The words may be different on your device. You can try searching for "permissions" in Settings.

These settings won't tell you everything about what a company does with your information. For example, does it keep your information or share it with others? These details are usually in its privacy information.

That information can be hard to read. You could ask someone you trust to look at it with you. You don't have to explain everything to your child at once. Focus on the choice you are making together.

DID YOU KNOW?

What the coloured dot on an iPhone means

On an iPhone with iOS 14 or later, an orange dot means an app is using the microphone without the camera. A green dot means it is using the camera, and perhaps the microphone too.

You can open Control Centre to see which app recently used them. The dot doesn't necessarily mean something is wrong. A phone call or taking a photo may explain it.

[Apple privacy guide](#)

[Android permissions guide](#)

[iPhone coloured dots](#)

When a toy talks back



Talking toys aren't new. When I was a child, there were action figures that spoke when you pulled a cord. Some newer toys use AI to make replies to what a child says. This is different from playing the same recorded words each time.

It's easy to see the appeal of a toy that answers questions or talks about something your child enjoys. The useful question is whether it works well for your child.

What the research found

A Cambridge report published in March 2026 looked at 14 children aged three to five playing with an AI toy called Gabbo. The children came from four London children's centres.

The researchers wrote examples based on what they saw. These brought together things that happened with different children.

In one example, a child said they felt sad. The toy replied about being happy itself. The researchers thought it might have heard the child wrongly.

During a counting game, the toy missed answers given while it was speaking. The child kept trying to answer and became frustrated.

During pretend play, the toy said it didn't sleep when children tried to put it to bed. It also said it couldn't open a pretend present. But there were fun moments too, including an imaginary spaceship race.

This was a small study of one toy. It doesn't tell us what happens when children use AI toys for a long time, or how they work for children with different needs. But it gives us useful questions to ask. Does the toy understand the child? Does it let them have a turn? Does it join in their play?

[Read Cambridge's AI in the Early Years report](#)

Look at how it responds to your child



If your child needs more time to answer, does the toy wait? If they use signs, gestures or a device to communicate, check whether the toy can understand them. Just because a toy can speak doesn't mean it can understand every way your child communicates.

Is the toy too loud or does it speak too quickly? Can you change this? Does your child enjoy using it, or spend most of the time trying to make it understand?

AI can give different answers to the same question. Think about whether your child would enjoy that or find it confusing.

If the toy gets something wrong, you could say, "The toy didn't understand that. You haven't done anything wrong." You can help or suggest something else to do. Your child doesn't have to keep trying to make it understand.

Before buying or connecting one

Find out when the toy listens and how to switch its microphone off. Ask whether it sends conversations over the internet or saves them. Who can read or hear them? Can you delete them? If the answers aren't clear, ask the seller or manufacturer.

Check what age the toy is for and whether an adult needs to be there when it is used. Does it need a regular payment, called a subscription? What will still work if you stop paying or the internet stops working?

This may matter if your child gets used to having the toy as part of their routine. Losing features suddenly could be upsetting.

Try the toy before buying it, if you can. Seeing it work well in an advert doesn't tell you how it will respond to your child.

Explain what the toy can and cannot do



Explain that a computer system makes the toy's replies. It can make mistakes. It isn't a person who can look after your child. They can still enjoy pretending it is a character, while knowing who to turn to for help.

Show your child how to stop the conversation. They don't have to answer every question the toy asks. Explain what they shouldn't tell it, such as their address or the name of their school.

Choose people your child can go to with a worry. Practise how they can ask for help. They might show a screen, use a message on their communication device or sit beside someone they trust. They don't have to explain everything in words.



Two resources to explore together



Find the Fake from Internet Matters

These quizzes look at AI and ways to check whether online information is true. There are choices for different ages. Look at a few questions first to see whether the words and examples suit your child.

Choose one question about something your child enjoys. If it helps, read it together or ask someone to help with unfamiliar words. Your child could answer by pointing. It is fine to say “I’m not sure”, even if the quiz asks you to choose. You don’t have to finish it all at once.

Talk about why an answer seemed right, rather than focusing on the score. If the quiz doesn’t suit your child, use one of its examples to show how you would check the answer.

[Explore Find the Fake](#)

Parents Power Up from Ofcom

Ofcom’s September guide helps families look at online gaming. It uses “Check, Chat, Change”: check the settings, talk about the game and make changes where needed. It also recognises the fun and friendships that games can offer.

Ask your child to show you something they enjoy in a game. They could show you a picture or play a little while you watch. You don’t need a long conversation to learn something useful.

Before changing a setting, check what it would mean for your child. Turning off chat, for example, might stop them talking to friends while they play. If a change is needed, explain it and look together for another way to do what they enjoy. Choose the parts of the guide that work for your family.

[Read Parents Power Up](#)

Until next time

You don’t need to know every app or have every answer. Start with one thing that matters to your family. Take your time, and ask for help if you need it. Taking an interest in what your child enjoys is a good place to begin.

Where to get help



You don't have to deal with a worry on your own. Choose the help that fits your situation.

Childline

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE UNDER 19

Free help with any worry. Call 0800 1111.

If talking is difficult, use an online 1-to-1 chat or send a message through a Childline account.

[Childline: phone and online support](#) →

NSPCC

FOR ADULTS WORRIED ABOUT A CHILD

Advice if you're worried about a child's safety or abuse.

Call 0808 800 5000, Monday–Friday, 10am–4pm.

You can also email help@nspcc.org.uk.

[NSPCC: help and contact options](#) →

Coram Kidscape

FOR PARENTS AND CARERS: BULLYING

Practical advice if your child is being bullied, including online. Call the Parent Advice Line on 0300 102 4481. Check the website for opening times and other contact options.

[Kidscape: Parent Advice Line](#) →

Report Remove

A REPORTING TOOL — NOT A HELPLINE

For under-18s in the UK worried about a nude or sexual image of themselves online. This free tool helps them report it for removal. Removal isn't guaranteed.

[Childline: use Report Remove](#) →

If someone is in immediate danger, call 999.

Apps: ages and family settings



An account age limit is the youngest age allowed for that account. It doesn't mean everything on the app is suitable. Tap a box below for the official guide.

YouTube

13+ FOR AN OWN ACCOUNT

For younger children, parents can set up a supervised account. Choose content settings and review what your child watches together. Filters won't catch everything.

[YouTube: supervised accounts](#) →

TikTok

13+ MINIMUM ACCOUNT AGE

Family Pairing links a parent's account with a teenager's. It offers settings for screen time, content and privacy. Some features have higher age limits.

[TikTok: Family Pairing guide](#) →

Snapchat

13+ MINIMUM ACCOUNT AGE

Family Center links a parent with their teenager. It can help you see who they're connecting with and manage safety settings. It doesn't let you read their chats.

[Snapchat: Family Center guide](#) →

Start with one app. Ask for help with the settings if you need it.

Games: ages and family settings



PEGI numbers describe game content, not how hard a game is. They don't rate the people your child might meet online. Check the game and the chat settings.

Roblox

KIDS ACCOUNTS: 5–8 / SELECT ACCOUNTS: 9–15

These are account age groups, not a rating for every game. Link a parent account to review games and chat. Available controls depend on your child's age.

[Roblox: parental controls and help](#) →

Minecraft

PEGI 7 — GAME CONTENT RATING

Use a child's Microsoft account in your family group to manage multiplayer and communication. Playing alone and joining an online server are different experiences.

[Minecraft: parents' guide and settings](#) →

Fortnite

BATTLE ROYALE: PEGI 12 / OTHER GAMES VARY

Each Fortnite experience has its own age rating. Epic's parental controls can limit access by rating and manage chat and play time. Also check spending controls on the device.

[Fortnite: Epic parental controls](#) →

Settings can help, but they don't remove every risk. Keep checking in with your child.