

How to help kids navigate fake news and misinformation online

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Young people get a [huge amount](#) of their news from social media feeds, where false, exaggerated or sponsored content is often prevalent. With the right tools, caregivers can give kids the knowledge they need to

assess credible information for themselves.

Being able to identify the trustworthiness of information is an important concern for everyone. Yet the sheer volume of material online and the speed at which it travels has made this an increasingly challenging task. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook provide a loudspeaker to anyone who can attract followers, no matter what their message or content.

Fake [news has the power](#) to normalise prejudices, to dictate us-versus-them mentalities and even, in extreme cases, to [justify](#) and encourage violence.

We have become obsessed with getting kids off their devices at the expense of developing their understanding of the online world. This is not about surveillance, but rather about having open conversations that empower children to understand and assess the usefulness of information for themselves.

Fake news is tricking children

Young people are growing up in a world where distributing large volumes of misinformation online has become a subtle yet powerful art.

It's no surprise then that [research published in 2016](#) by Stanford University suggests kids "may focus more on the content of [social media](#) posts than on their sources".

For example, of 203 [middle school students](#) surveyed as part of the report, more than 80% thought a native ad on the news website Slate labelled "sponsored content" was a real news story. A majority of high [school students](#) questioned by the researchers didn't recognise and explain the significance of the blue checkmark on a verified Fox News Facebook account.

With the amount of content we see in a busy day, it's possible that these subtleties are being lost on many adults as well.

Minimising the harm of fake news for kids

Helping [young people](#) navigate online spaces requires better skills in verifying what is true and what isn't.

Here are five questions to start the conversation with children.

Find an online post that you consider to be fake news and talk with the child about it. Shape your conversation around these questions:

- Who made this post?
- Who do they want to view it?
- Who benefits from this post and/or who might be harmed by it?
- Has any information been left out of the post that might be important?
- Is a reliable source (like a mainstream news outlet) reporting the same news? If they're not, it doesn't mean it's not true, but it does mean you should dig deeper.

Clues for children to use

Detecting fake news can be like a "spot the difference" game.

These questions are clues for kids that a source may be dodgy:

- Is the URL or site name unusual? For example, those with a ".co" are often trying to masquerade as real news sites.
- Is the post low-quality, possibly containing bold claims with no sources and lots of spelling or grammatical errors?

- Does the post use sensationalist imagery? Women in sexy clothing are popular clickbait for unreliable content.
- Are you shocked, angry or overjoyed by the post? Fake news often strives to provoke a reaction, and if you're having an intense emotional response then it could be a clue the report isn't balanced or accurate.
- How is the story structured and what kind of proof does it offer? If it merely repeats accusations against the people involved in an incident without further reporting, for example, there's probably a better version of the story out there from a more reliable news source.

Get to know the rules

Many social media sites are now also cracking down on the spread of fake news. Showing kids the restrictions these sites are imposing on their users will help them get a rounded understanding of the problem.

For example, asking kids to read [the rules](#) by which Reddit will remove [content](#) from r/news is a good starting point. Facebook also offers "[Tips to Spot False News](#)", suggesting readers check that other sources are reporting similar facts and that they look out for weird formatting, among other hints.

Growing up in a world of [fake news](#) doesn't have to be a heavy burden for kids. Rather, it requires extra support from adults to help them understand and navigate the digital world.

Our goal should be not only to help children survive this complicated online world, but to equip them with the knowledge they need to flourish in it.

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