What to teach your preschooler about internet safety

December 8 2017, by Susan Edwards

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Fifteen years ago, parents and caregivers did not have to worry about teaching pre-school aged children about internet safety. A new report prepared for the Children's Commissioner of England suggests this time has passed.

Children now live in a digital age, which means internet access is [a daily part of life](#) for many young children around the world.

[Touchscreen technologies](#) have changed how accessible the internet is for very young children, particularly between the ages of four and five. It's now quicker and easier to connect to the internet using these technologies, as they don't require the same level of fine motor and literacy skills used to navigate a [mouse and keyboard](#).

More recently, [the Internet of Things](#) has become widespread. The Internet of Things uses small chips embedded in everyday items, including children's toys, to communicate information to the net. Children's dolls, teddy bears and figurines can record their play and upload this information as data to the web. This can occur without children's consent because they wouldn't be aware they're generating data.

The three main risks

Internet safety addresses three main risks faced by children online. These are [contact, conduct and content risks](#):
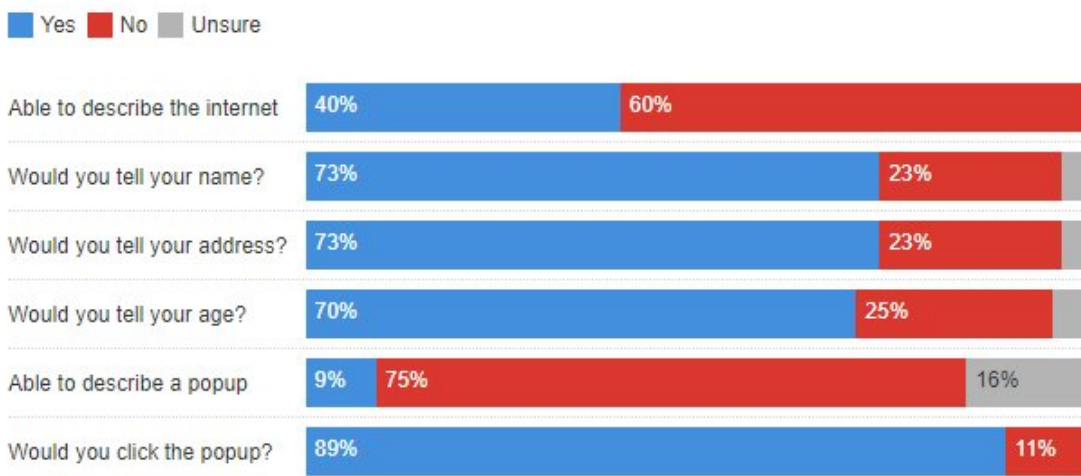
- contact risks involve children talking to unknown people on the internet. Contact risks also include the harvesting of children's data, such as recording their activity on an online game
- conduct risks are about behaving respectfully online and learning to manage digital footprints
- content risks are concerned with the type of material children view and consume when accessing the internet.

For pre-school aged children, content risks include accidentally viewing inappropriate content such as pornography. Content also considers the quality of material made available to children. How people are

represented in society is mirrored back to children through the media they consume. Quality content for young children has been a concern of the Australian Council on Children and the Media for many years.

Contact risks are most likely to occur for pre-school aged children in the form of pop-ups. Children of this age can also be active in virtual worlds, such as Pocoyo World or Club Penguin, where they can engage with other members. Children may not always know the members they are playing with in these worlds.

Four-year-old children's knowledge of the internet

Legend: Yes (blue), No (red), Unsure (grey)

Question	Yes	No	Unsure
Able to describe the internet	40%	60%	
Would you tell your name?	73%	23%	
Would you tell your address?	73%	23%	
Would you tell your age?	70%	25%	
Able to describe a popup	9%	75%	16%
Would you click the popup?	89%		11%

Responses given in individual interviews with 70 four-year-olds.
Source: Author provided

Conduct involves learning how to be respectful online. Parents can model good conduct behaviours to their children by always asking permission to take photos before posting to social media.

Children as young as four are now online

Internet safety in early childhood is a new area of research because, until now, children as young as four weren't able to easily access the internet.

A recent [study](#) conducted with 70 four-year old children examined what children understand about the internet and being safe online. In this study, only 40% of children were able to [describe the internet](#). This was despite all of the children having access to internet at home, predominately through touchscreen technologies.

Children's understandings of the internet were associated with their experiences going online and using technologies with their families. They defined the internet as being "in the iPad" or something they used "in the lounge room" to "play games".

Children were also aware the internet "was used by Mummy for her work" or "by my big sister for her emails". Some 73% of the children said they would tell someone their address on the internet. And 70% said they would also tell someone how old they were. A further 89% of children indicated they would click on a pop-up even if they did not know what the pop-up was about.

Parenting young children for internet safety

Because children face content, contact and conduct risks online, they require a basic understanding of the internet. The most important thing parents can teach their children about [internet safety](#) is that "the internet" means a network of technologies that can "talk" to each other.

This is like teaching children to be sun smart. First, we explain the sun can harm our skin. Next we teach children to wear a hat, a long-sleeved

shirt and sunscreen to protect themselves.

For internet safety, we should first explain the internet uses many technologies that share information created and collected by lots of people. Then we can teach our children how to protect themselves online. Some things to teach your child are:

- seek adult help when you encounter a pop-up
- only use adult approved sources for content
- don't share personal information online
- try to be near an adult when using a device
- only click on apps and tabs a parent or caregiver has set up for you.

The internet forms a large part of daily life for many young children. From watching their favourite YouTube clips, to playing games, to talking with a long-distance relative over video-conferencing, being online is not much different to a young child than being offline. Being safe in both spaces is possible with adult support.

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