

Fighting the digital grinch: Cybersecurity tips for kids and parents for a safe festive season

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While parents and schools have measures in place to keep children safe at school, on the playground and at home, it's important to remember cybercriminals don't take a break during weekends and school holidays, says Carey van Vlaanderen, CEO of [ESET South Africa](#).



Carey van Vlaanderen - CEO at Eset Southern Africa

When it comes to child online safety, panic and fearmongering are unhelpful. There are of course very real risks to children in virtually every online space. Fortunately, the more empowered parents are with the right information and the right cybersecurity tools, the better they can protect their children. This is especially true during the school holidays when kids of all ages may be using the internet more than usual for fun and entertainment.

Various research and surveys across the globe highlight that kids are spending more time in front of screens than ever before. Widely accepted estimates suggest kids and teens between the ages of 8 to 18 spend about 44.5 hours each week in front of digital screens. The World Health Organisation and paediatric societies worldwide have adopted screen time guidelines which recommend children under the age of five spend one hour or less on digital devices each day, while those under the age of one should skip the screens altogether. Whatever screen limits you decide on, kids should not be left unsupervised online, especially during the long year-end holiday period when scammers and criminals are well aware that youngsters are online and prone to boredom.

Tools for TikTok

TikTok users have now surpassed one billion, quickly becoming the social media site of choice for tweens and teens. The official minimum age of TikTok users is 13, but no age verification mechanism is used. When it comes to social media and TikTok, it's important to have a conversation about the difference between sharing and oversharing with your kids, and that while sharing thoughts, ideas and memories online can be a good thing, sharing things like where they go to school, and detailed travel plans should stay private. It's also crucial that parents understand social media guidelines and what an app entails and how it handles their children's data.

Fun and games, but safely

With more young people gaming during school holidays, parents should be aware that cybercriminals may also use online gaming as a platform to access data, which can compromise both child's and parents' personal information. Aside from parents keeping an eye on making sure only age-appropriate games are played, freemium games are another area to watch. Freemium games offer free gameplay but charge for access to extra features, leading to inadvertent expenses when children use their parents' credit or debit cards to purchase these benefits. The ease of setting up payments via app stores on smartphones can exacerbate the problem. To prevent unauthorised in-app purchases, parents can create separate gaming accounts for their children on devices and consoles, employ parental controls to restrict online payment access, and preview potential costs before allowing game downloads.

In the same way that buckling your seatbelt and road safety is a default mindset, online safety comes by instilling the

consequences and understanding the dangers from a very early age, using guidance that is repetitive and comes from multiple sources. When used well, digital devices and the internet can be educational, inspiring, fun – and most importantly – safer for young people.

A parent's survival guide to keeping kids safe online over the school holidays:

Get curious and stay informed

A parent's approach towards online safety will undoubtedly adjust according to their child's age, but irrespective of how old they are, it's always beneficial to communicate openly and honestly with your kids. Ask questions about your child's online use, their favourite websites, platforms, and games, and why they enjoy them. Get familiar with and understand social media sites, the risks of each, and know exactly who your child is engaging with on the platforms they use.

Communicate that the internet is the real world

The internet is real life. Just as there are criminals, scammers, and places unsuitable for minors in the physical world, the same holds true of the internet. Cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and identity theft may start online, but can have serious and long-lasting consequences offline.

Set clear expectations and boundaries

With millions of apps on Google Play and Apple's App Store, and nearly two billion websites on the internet, there is no shortage of things your child can do on a digital device over the school holidays. Talk through expectations and boundaries with your kids about the amount of screen time allowed and when. Depending on their age, kids can, and often do, understand that excessive screen time isn't good for them. Discussing the potentially harmful impact of too much time online paves the way for children to be more thoughtful about their own habits and responsive to the rules you establish.

Use the best cybersecurity tools you can

Aside from taking the necessary time to monitor your child's internet use and behaviour online, parents can opt for an intelligent helper that can aid you in protecting your children online: a parental control app. These can assist you in putting your rules into practice and making it more difficult for unsuitable people and content to reach your child – at home, on holiday, and whenever they're online.

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