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## Online safety for children: a guide to protecting your kids online

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In 2013 the UK government instructed ISPs to offer an opt-out network wide filter on all broadband services, aimed at blocking adult material without the need for end users to worry about installing and configuring additional software.

But there are problems with this approach. For one, it means your entire connection is filtered. While that may be useful when it comes to protecting children it could inconvenience the grown up members of a household. In turn they may disable it or use workarounds, which ends up rendering the whole exercise pointless.

It can also result in legitimate sites being banned, which again may lead parents to simply disable it. And ultimately it is relatively very easy to bypass. For instance, the blocks on file sharing sites like The Pirate Bay have been largely unsuccessful since it's so simple to get around the restrictions.

But however you feel about this effort, there's no denying the fact that the internet contains an enormous amount of material which is completely unsuitable for children.

Yet it's utterly essential to modern life, and this causes a real headache for parents. The internet is an invaluable research tool for homework, among many other things, and denying children access because you're concerned about what they might be seeing is a step too far.

The best option for parents is to learn how to control access and educate themselves and their kids about the dangers. Then you'll know exactly what your kids are up to and you can leave this ISP level filter disabled so it doesn't interfere with your own internet usage.

### Basic safety tips

Before we get into the more technical aspects, there are a few simple things you can do to control access and help keep kids safer online.



- Don't share passwords

Keep your Wi-Fi, computer login and other passwords private so your kids can't get online whenever they feel like it. Remember that all kinds of devices support wireless now, including games consoles and mobile phones.



- Keep PCs out of bedrooms

It's a lot simpler to control your kids internet access if they don't have a computer in their room, so until they're older you may want to keep a computer in the living room or other common areas, rather than giving them their own laptop.

- Talk to your kids

One of the most important things you can do is make sure children are aware of the impact online activities could have on their lives. This isn't just the obvious stuff like illegal content which could get them (or you) into trouble with the law, but also how much information they make available about themselves, particularly with regard social media. We are unfortunately now in an age when youthful mistakes can be very public and potentially follow them into adulthood to affect their lives and careers far into the future.

## Blocking web sites

Many parents may simply wish to block either specific web sites or particular types of sites, and this is something you can do very easily through a variety of methods, and without spending any money.

### The Windows Hosts file

One easy way to block access to specific web addresses on a Windows PC is via the Windows Hosts file.

This is found in `C:\Windows\System32\Drivers\Etc` (though you may first need to enable viewing of hidden system files through the *Folder Options > View* menu).

Right-click and select *Open With*, then open the Hosts file with Notepad to edit it. To block a site simply add this on a new line:

```
127.0.0.1 www.webaddress.com
```

This tells Windows that the URL is located on your own machine, preventing it from loading.

It's a quick, and free, method to block individual sites, but doing a large number of them is laborious, it only works on a single computer at a time, and you can only block entire domains.

### Router site blocking

Another free method for preventing access to sites is to use the features built into [home broadband](#) routers, with the advantage that it will work on anything connected to your network, not just a selected system.

The exact steps will vary depending on your router, but generally the site blocking options are found under *Security*, and should allow you to enter either a domain name or a keyword - that means you can block general terms as well as exact sites, which offers much more flexibility.

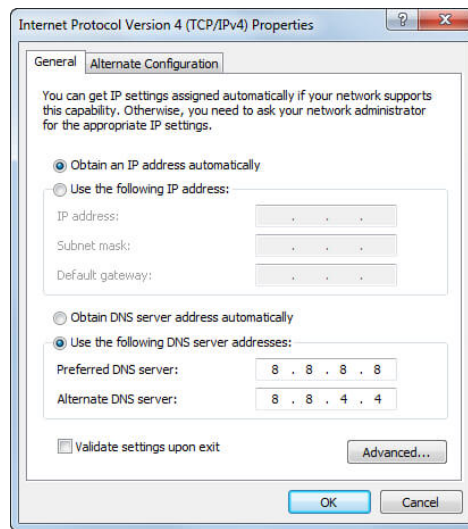
It's also usually possible to choose between permanently blocking a site/keyword or setting a schedule, so the blocking is only activated at particular times. This is useful if you'd rather have it disabled when the kids have gone to bed so there's no unintended effects on your net access.

Another common setting is entering a trusted IP address, which means selected devices will never be blocked. Use this if you'd rather exclude your own computer from the blocking rules, or if a device like a streaming player has issues with the block, though you may need to set a static IP address on each trusted device.

## OpenDNS parental controls

When you tap a URL into your web browser it's translated into the actual server IP address by a Domain Name Server. By default your computer and router will be setup to automatically access your ISP's DNS, however it is possible to choose an alternate server and this can include child protection features.

OpenDNS is (mostly) free for anyone to use, and one of the services they provide is parental controls. You simply need to register then follow the instructions to configure it. After that, it will block unwanted URLs whenever access is attempted.



## Block Sites

### Keyword Blocking

- Never  
 Per Schedule  
 Always

Type Keyword or Domain Name Here:

Block Sites Containing these Keywords or Domain Names:

### Allow Trusted IP Addresses

Allow Trusted IP Address to Visit Blocked Sites

Trusted IP Address:

On some routers it is possible to configure a custom DNS which means that your entire network will be protected, however this is not always possible, particularly with ISP supplied hardware (Sky's models do not allow it, for instance).

If that's the case you will need to change the DNS settings on each computer, but this is very easy and won't take more than a few minutes (a Google search will reveal all if you can't find the settings yourself).

For Windows, locate your network adapter in the network settings within Control Panel, click Properties, select Internet Protocol Version 4 then hit Properties. Just choose the 'Use the following DNS server addresses' radio button and enter the server IP provided.

## Child safety software

Using the Hosts file and router security settings can be helpful in many situations, but you may prefer to go with a software package, particularly if you're not too keen on fiddling with system files or battling your router's configuration tools (which can often be frustrating).

For many parents a software package may be the best all-round solution, as it provides a high level of protection but will not change browsing behaviour on the rest of your network. They can also offer a huge number of features including detailed activity reports, in some cases even emailing you a regular update. Just knowing that you can see everything they do may be all it takes to stop children from being tempted to poke around the net's darker recesses.

Provided you've kept the Wi-Fi password safe and prevented kids from using other hardware to access the internet, these applications can simply be installed on one PC, configured, and then you don't have to worry. It also means that you can feel safer about giving them their own computer or letting them use the family system without watching over their shoulder.

## [K9 Web Protection](#)

There's no shortage of software applications designed to keep children safe online, but one of the best is entirely free.

An extremely comprehensive tool, K9 can block sites based on category, so you don't need to worry about specifying exact web addresses, prevent web access at certain times of the day, monitor online activity, and offers options to whitelist and blacklist particular sites. There are also iPhone and Android versions available, as well as PC and Mac.



## [Norton Family](#)

The basic free version of Norton Family provides activity reports, site blocking, social network monitors, time limits and search engine records, but paying for the premier edition unlocks additional features such as online video monitoring, time summaries, emailed activity reports and a great deal of detailed activity tracking with 90 day records. Premier also supports Android smartphones and tablets.

## [Microsoft Live Family Safety](#)

More basic than K9 or Norton, but this entirely free tool does offer the fundamentals of online activity monitoring and web site filtering, and being a Microsoft application it integrates smoothly with Windows user accounts, so you can very easily configure it to activate on your kids accounts while not touching your own.

## Useful links

### [CEOP](#)

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection has a huge amount of information and assistance relating to child abuse.

### [ChildLine](#)

Cyber-bullying information from ChildLine.

### [Internet Watch Foundation](#)

The IWF works with ISPs and the police to monitor online child abuse sites. The public can report suspected sites here.

### [Mobile Phones Direct safety hub](#)

[Guide to UK ISP blocking and web filters](#)

[How to buy your own Wi-Fi broadband router](#)

[How to use Gmail aliases to stop spam and organise email](#)

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