Let's talk about life online

Advice and conversation starters for supporting your child to stay safe online

Childnet International

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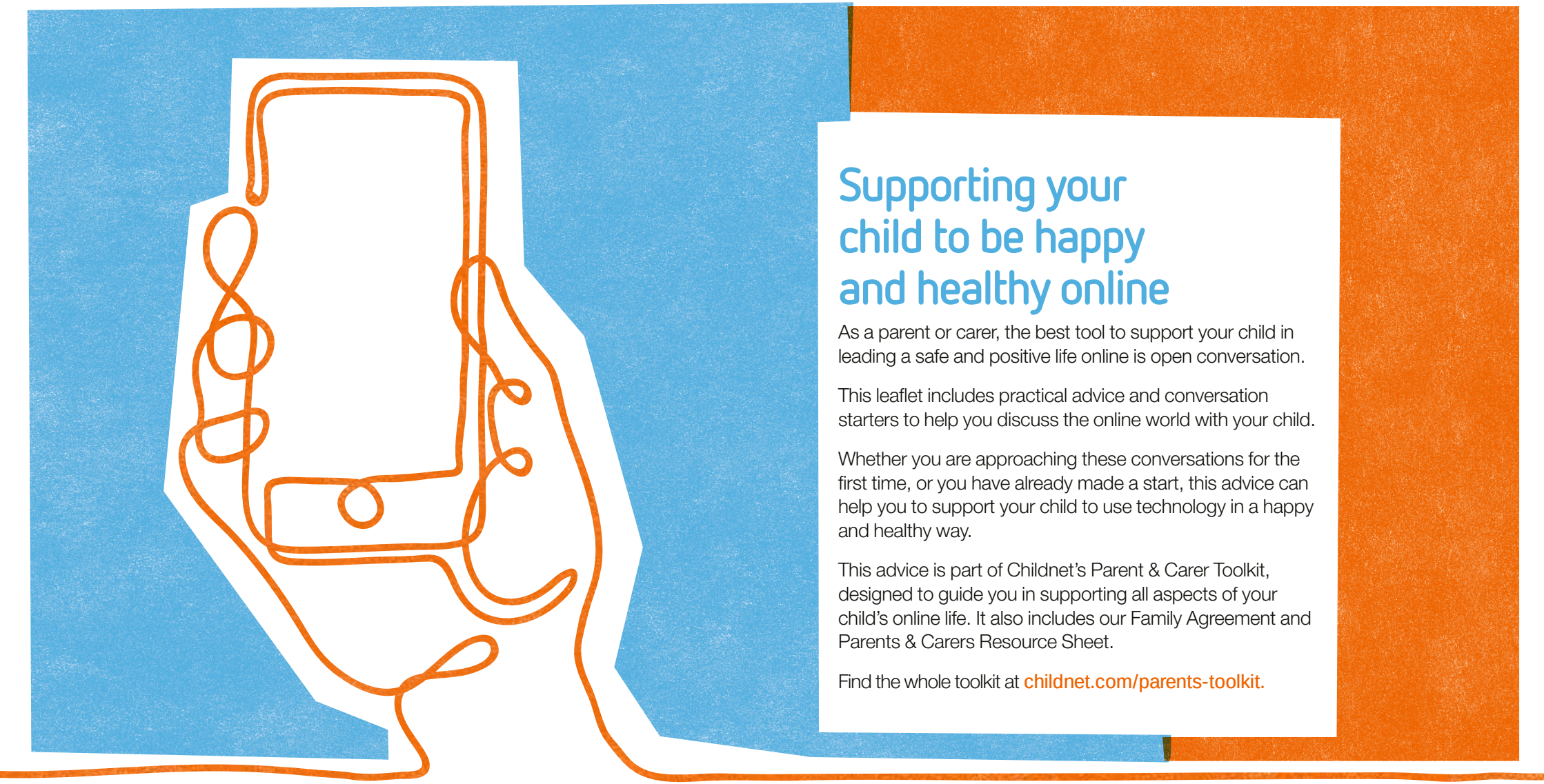

Supporting your child to be happy and healthy online

As a parent or carer, the best tool to support your child in leading a safe and positive life online is open conversation.

This leaflet includes practical advice and conversation starters to help you discuss the online world with your child.

Whether you are approaching these conversations for the first time, or you have already made a start, this advice can help you to support your child to use technology in a happy and healthy way.

This advice is part of Childnet's Parent & Carer Toolkit, designed to guide you in supporting all aspects of your child's online life. It also includes our Family Agreement and Parents & Carers Resource Sheet.

Find the whole toolkit at childnet.com/parents-toolkit.

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Start with the positives

The internet can be a fantastic place for children, providing them with exciting opportunities. Talking about the positives of going online, keeping the conversations broad and valuing your child's opinion shows that you are interested in all aspects of their online world. Remain open-minded, and remember children use the internet differently to adults. To be dismissive of online apps, games or trends may put off your child from continuing any conversations.

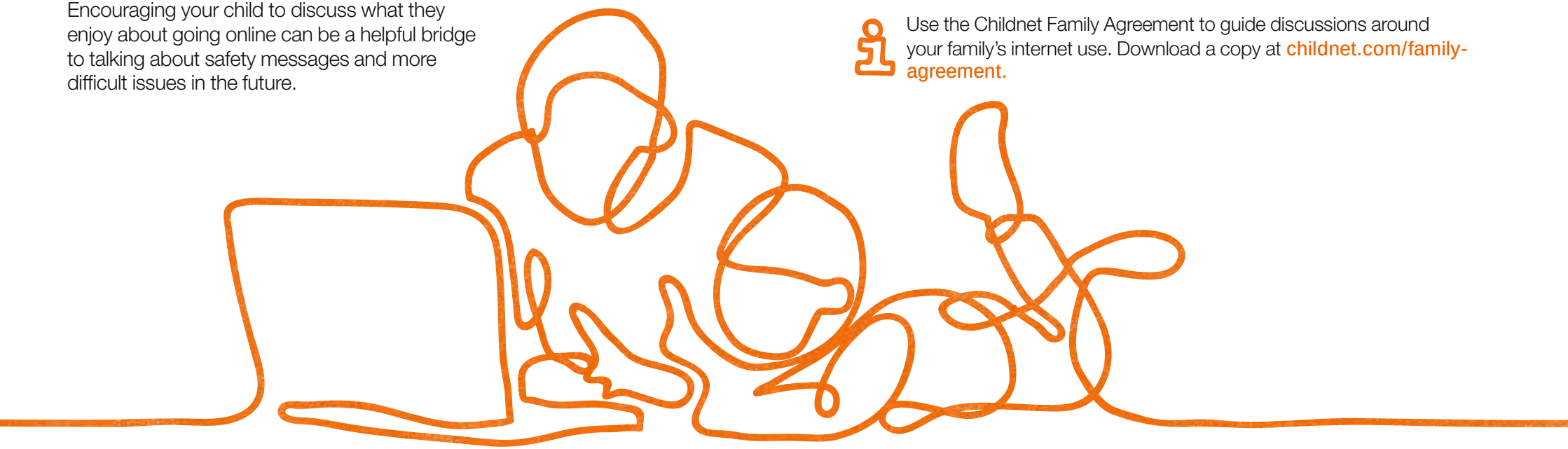
Encouraging your child to discuss what they enjoy about going online can be a helpful bridge to talking about safety messages and more difficult issues in the future.

Working together

Get your family together to discuss how you use technology and what you use it for. Come to a joint agreement on using it safely and responsibly, and work together to set clear expectations and boundaries. Let your child know what they can do if anything happens online that is worrying, upsetting or confusing, and remind them they can always talk to you about anything.

Make discussions with your child about their online experiences a regular part of family life. If your child mentions something you haven't heard of, ask them to show you, or explain in more detail. You could also do your own research, and discuss ways you can support your child to use technology safely together.

Use the Childnet Family Agreement to guide discussions around your family's internet use. Download a copy at childnet.com/family-agreement.



Have a chat…

- What makes you happy when you use technology?
- How do find videos/profiles/ games you like online?
- What is it that you like about this….? (e.g. app/website/game)

Talk it over…

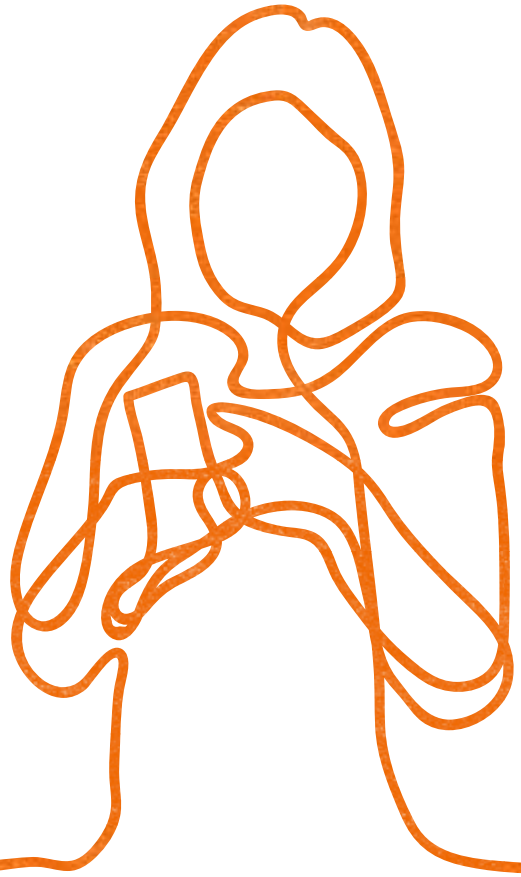
- Are there any updates/new features to your favourite apps/games? Can you show me how they work?
- What can we do as a family to help keep each other safe online?
- What would you do if..? (e.g. you watched a worrying video, you were sent a mean message)

Keep it relevant

As they get older, children will use technology and the internet differently. The challenges they may face will change too. To get a sense of how much they know and what support they still need, ask open-ended questions to let your child lead the conversations you have.

Consider the purpose of any discussion you start with your child, and use this to guide the direction it takes. There are appropriate ways to approach all online safety topics with different ages. For example, with a teenager, nude images can be spoken about in wider conversations around consent and healthy relationships. For younger children, you could discuss what types of images are okay to share online, and what areas of our bodies are private.

You can find guidance on how to address different topics with children of all ages at childnet.com/parents-hot-topics.



Why not try...

How do you spend your time online?

What have you heard about… online? (e.g. sharing photos, bullying)

What worries you about life online?

Tackling difficult conversations

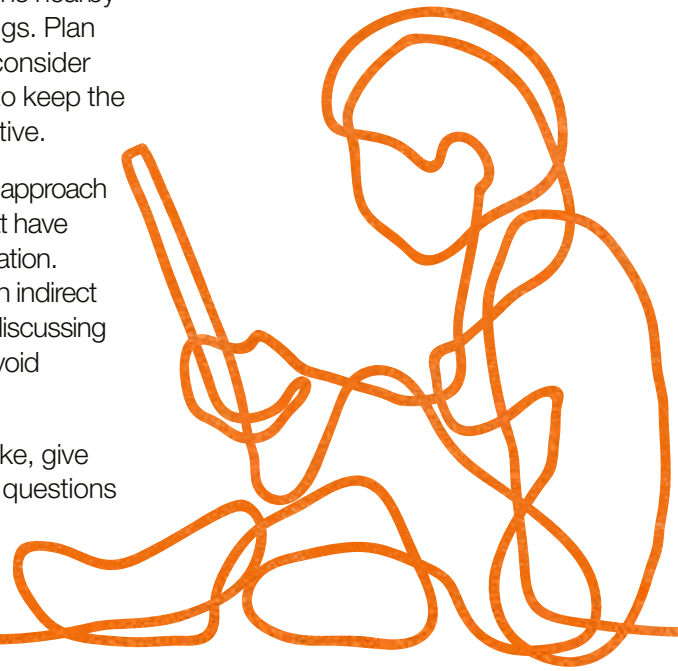
Often, difficult topics of conversation can be planned for, but with online content being so accessible, occasionally they can be needed earlier than anticipated.

Seek support and information so that you feel prepared. This could be from family, friends, school staff, websites or helplines. Choose a time your child is relaxed, with no distractions nearby such as technology or siblings. Plan what you want to say, and consider how your child might react to keep the conversation calm and positive.

You may wish to take a direct approach and explain the concerns that have lead you to start this conversation. Alternatively, you might feel an indirect approach is more suitable - discussing young people in general to avoid additional pressure.

Whichever approach you take, give your child time to think, ask questions and share their thoughts without interruption or blame. Listen carefully to any confusion or concerns. Reassure them you are always there to help and even if you don't know the answers, you can find these out together.

You can find helpful links to advice on difficult topics at childnet.com/have-a-conversation.



Open with...

I'd like to talk about… with you, but first I'd like to hear your thoughts about it.

What do you think young people your age think about…?

Are there any questions you want to ask me about…?

What if something goes wrong?

If your child comes to you with a concern, try to remain calm and curious, rather than furious. Avoid blame or criticism, as this may close down the conversation if your child feels they have done something wrong or they are in trouble. Instead, remain non-judgmental, acknowledge the challenges they have overcome, and thank them for telling you.

If you find out your child is dealing with a worrying situation online, but is unwilling to speak about it, reassure them you want to help make things better. Avoid pressuring them to speak before they are ready. Gently try some broad questions to open up a dialogue, and give them plenty of time to answer.

It's okay if you are unsure what to do next, the important thing is to let your child know you are there for them. There is a lot of further support out there to help you decide on your next steps.

You can find helpline numbers, further advice and information on reporting at childnet.com/parents-help.

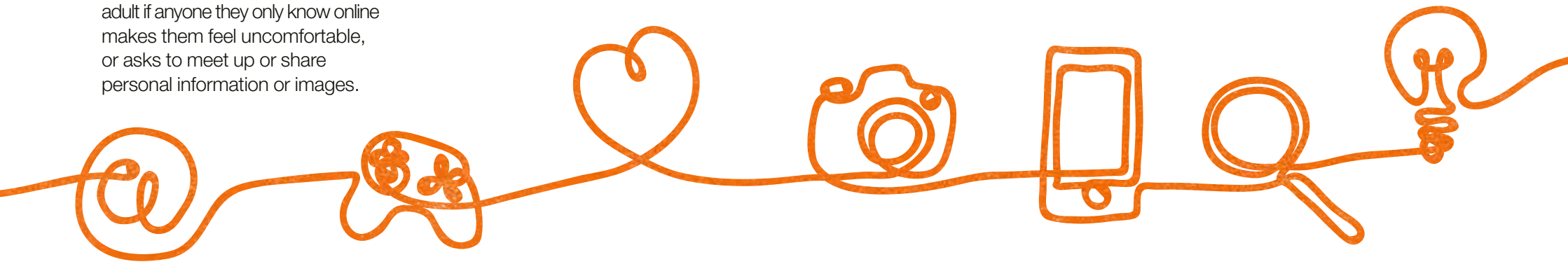
Let's talk...

I can see that something is worrying you, can I help?

Can we talk about ....? Remember, I'm always here to help no matter how big the problem might feel.

Can you explain to me how it happened so we can fix the problem together?

10 Key messages to share with your child

However and wherever you have a conversation with your child, here are 10 top tips you can share to support them in staying safe online.

1. "You can always come to me if you need help." This is the most important thing to let your child know, and a way to give them confidence to speak to you when they need support.
2. "What would you do if this happened…?" Give your child strategies to deal with upsetting experiences online.
3. "Remember that not everyone is who they say they are online." Remind your child to always tell an adult if anyone they only know online makes them feel uncomfortable, or asks to meet up or share personal information or images.
4. "Keep your personal information safe, and other people's too." This includes full names, contact details, and real-time locations.
5. "Be respectful to others online." Remind them if it's not okay offline...
6. "Think before you post." Help your child to be aware that their online actions can have consequences for themselves and others.
7. "Remember to ask if it's okay." Asking for, and receiving permission from others online is important before sharing images, adding people into group chats, etc.
8. "Remember not everything is true online." Help your child to be a critical thinker to find accurate information.
9. "The things other people post online might not always show what their life is really like." Reassure your child that nobody's life is as perfect as it may seem online, and judging yourself against other's online lives isn't a fair comparison.
10. "Recognise how going online makes you feel and take a break when you need to." Your child may need support in doing this, such as timers and reminders.