

CHATTING ONLINE AND CHILD SAFETY

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS ON HOW TO HELP CHILDREN KEEP SAFE WHILE CHATTING

CHILDREN AND CHATTING

CHAT: WHAT IS IT?

The internet offers great opportunities to interact and communicate with friends and people from all over the world. Chatting over the Internet can be done with a group of people in a chatroom, or with the person you are playing an online game against. As well as being able to add your comments to a conversation ongoing in a chatroom or online game between a number of people, it is also usually possible to chat privately to one person in these environments.

Chatrooms can be accessed on mobile phones as well as computers and other online devices, and chat can be provided by Internet Service Providers (ISPs), such as BT or Wanadoo, or Portals such as Yahoo, or in fact by anyone with a website.

WHY DO CHILDREN LOVE CHATTING?

The communication is in real time (in other words it is instantaneous), and it is the fast-moving nature of this communication, and the anonymity that it allows which forms part of the attraction for children. In a chatroom, you can be whoever you want to be and it gives the chance for experimenting and expression with less inhibition and more risk-taking than perhaps there would be in the real world. Although this can be great fun, it does also have its negative side.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS?

There are potential risks in communicating to people that you don't know, and unfortunately some children have been hurt having gone to meet the 'friends' they have made online. Adults with a sexual interest in children have used chatrooms and other interactive areas online to make contact with and befriend children, and then 'groomed' them, ie persuaded and manipulated them to meet up where they have been abused.

There have also been cases of children being bullied or threatened online in chat environments.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This document aims to help parents and carers in their understanding of what good practice is in the provision of chat services¹, to help them help their children find 'good' chatrooms and to be aware of how to chat safely.

This document is a summary of the good practice models and guidance for the internet industry published by the Home Office Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet on chat services as well as on moderation². The original documents were chiefly aimed at chat providers (as well as Instant Messaging and other web-based services providers) to make them aware of what good practice is, but this information is also relevant to parents and carers to help them know what makes a good service, enabling them to identify such a service for their children to use.

¹ See http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/operational-policing/ho_model.pdf?view=Binary

² See <http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/operational-policing/moderation.pdf?view=Binary>