

# VIRTUAL FRIENDSHIPS



## Why Do Young People Make Friends Online?



57% of teens have met a new friend online. Social media and games are the most common places to meet friends.

In today's digital culture, becoming friends with people online is as natural as becoming friends with people in the same class at school. Although this might seem strange to certain generations, the concept of making friends with someone you've never met isn't anything new: organised pen pal services have been around for nearly 100 years!

## ⚠️ RISKS

### CYBERBULLYING AND TROLLING



It is not unusual to hear young people talking about how their school friendship group has fallen out or the mean words said behind their back by their best friend. However, these types of disagreements and fights can take on a different form when they play out online, especially if there is a core group or community (such as a fandom) that all become involved, and one person becomes a target. Unlike in a school, a victim who is targeted online can be harassed 24/7 by their bullies, who are often without the limitations of worrying that a parent, carer or teacher might be a witness to their actions.

### FAKE PROFILES AND CATFISHING

Unless apps and platforms implement the use of age verification and facial recognition tools and software, there will always be a risk that users aren't who they portray themselves to be. There's an almost endless list of why someone might create a fake profile – from seeking financial gain through fraud or with the intention of grooming, through to boredom or being unhappy with their appearance and/or real-life circumstances.

### GROOMING

Building a friendship with someone online can be a tactic used as a part of grooming. A young person may feel they can trust this person and therefore might tell them personal information that will put them at risk, such as what school they go to. If a young person believes they are talking to a real friend or an online romantic partner, there is the potential to be convinced, tricked or bribed into sending self-generated child sexual abuse materials.

### SCREEN TIME AND ISOLATION

If a young person is feeling lonely and isolated in 'real life', they may turn to the digital world to find friendships and a community. Although this may bring a lot of positives, for some young people there could be risks associated with this such as:

- **Too much screen time.** There is no definitive answer to 'how much screen time is too much?' although studies have shown effects include shrinkage in parts of the brain needed for executive function, and some psychologists have expressed concern.
- **Exposure to extremism and radicalisation.** People who are isolated, unhappy, feeling angry and 'different' are some of the factors that might make a young person vulnerable to being targeted by extremist groups.

### HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE MEET ONLINE FRIENDS?

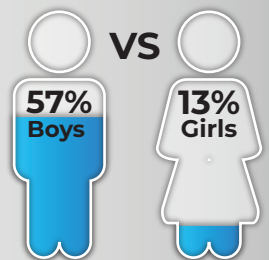
- SPECIFIC INTEREST WEBSITES
- FRIEND FINDING APPS
- SOCIAL MEDIA SITES
- ONLINE GAMING
- FANDOMS

### WHY MAKE FRIENDS ONLINE?

There are many reasons why young people make friends online, including feeling socially isolated in 'real life' or living far away from others in their peer group.

Making friends online is not always born out of responding to a negative situation, of course! In fact, most young people will make friends online as a positive addition to their lives, alongside friends they make through school and hobbies.

Boys are substantially more likely to meet new friends while playing games online.



## TOP TIPS!

**TALK ABOUT WHAT FRIENDSHIP MEANS.** Ask the young person in your life about what friendship looks like to them – how does a friend act? How does a friend make you feel? Discuss together what a 'warning sign' might be that someone may not be a real friend, such as pressuring you for your time, money or photos.

**ASK ABOUT THEIR ONLINE FRIENDS.** Just as you would discuss their friends from school or sports club, make talking about online friends just as part of the norm. This way, if something happens with an online friend that upsets or worries them, the young person in your life will feel safe to come to you as you've already established a rapport about online friends.

**KEEP CALM!** Don't jump to conclusions that all online friends are potential 'predators' or have nefarious purposes – even if the concept of online friendships is unusual to you. Remember that is quite normal in today's culture for young people to have friends online that they've never met.

**TALK ABOUT CATFISHING AND FAKE PROFILES.** Learn together some of the tell-tale signs that a profile might not be real, such as a lack of photos or other people interacting with their profile.

**HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PERSONAL INFORMATION.** Encourage the young person in your care to stop and think before putting photos and posts online or discussing with an online friend anything that may give away personal information.

**CHECK SAFETY SETTINGS AND LEARN HOW TO BLOCK AND REPORT.** Double check your safety settings together to help keep them safer online.

