



O₂ Child Protection
Safe use of mobile chat rooms



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Mobile phones can be positive as they enable you to stay in touch with your child at any time of the day. The chat rooms that can be accessed through some mobile phones are social environments which can help teach children social skills and confidence from interacting with others.

Mobile phones do more than allow your child to talk and text – some models can be used to access the Internet, which could put your child at risk. However, research findings indicate that the vast majority of children have positive experiences online.

O₂ does what it can to make its chat rooms a safer environment – there are safety tips when a user registers and separate rooms for children, so that users can't go from an 'Under 18 forum' to an 'Over 18 forum', and vice versa. O₂ also provides human moderation to check all user profiles (the public information people supply about themselves), text messages, pictures and audio files. However, in order to ensure your child's safety, it is important to ensure that you have open lines of communication with your child with respect to their online activities.

This leaflet focuses on the risks associated with your child accessing chat facilities (chat rooms) on a mobile phone, in order to converse with chat friends that he or she may or may not know in the real world. It focuses in particular on the risk of your child having contact with other chat users who may behave in a negative manner towards your child.

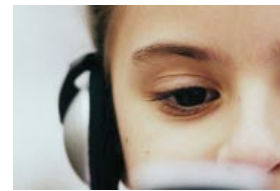
Users with a negative manner include...

Bullies – who may engage in abusive, threatening or harassing behaviours towards your child. They may contact your child through the Internet (email or chat room) and/or on a mobile phone.

Paedophiles – who may attempt to extract personal contact details from your child, with a view to meeting them in the real world.

Risks that children and young people may face

- Mobiles allow others to contact your child at any time during the day. This can allow bullies to harass a child (by text messaging or phone calls), while users with a negative manner may pressure a child to meet face-to-face
- Pictures can make your child identifiable to strangers and may also give their location away. They are an optional feature of public profiles in chat rooms, and may be requested by chat friends. Your child should not automatically assume that it is OK to send pictures to chat friends
- The mobility afforded to children through their mobile phones could potentially be risky, for example, if they are asked in a chat room, "Where are you right now?". An answer that provides specific details of the child's current location, e.g. "I'm in/outside the library in xxx town" could enable a user with a negative intent to find your child in the real world. Therefore, it is important to advise your child to intentionally be vague about their location, e.g. "I am in the UK", or "just hanging out"
- Be aware that other children may give out your child's contact details. Negotiate a 'Safe Mobile Phone Use Agreement', not only with your child but also the parents of your child's friends



Online paedophiles

Paedophiles may spend a lot of time getting to know a child online and becoming their friend. A paedophile may pose as a child's best friend and encourage a child to divulge more and more personal information. It is important to recognise that a sense of trust and understanding will develop as the relationship progresses. A key aspect of counteracting the activities of paedophiles is to ensure that you are aware of your child's online friendships and that your child feels confident that they can discuss the nature of their online friendships with you.

Things parents can do

- Realise that it is not necessary to have an in-depth understanding of the technical aspects underpinning mobile phones or the Internet, in order to educate your children about safety with respect to 'chat friends'. The same principles apply that you use to teach your children about staying safe and managing relationships in everyday life
- Reassure your children that they should feel confident that no matter what they tell you, you will react in a calm and reasonable manner. Children's biggest fear is that if they tell you about any negative online experiences they will have their Internet access terminated or their mobile confiscated. It is important to keep the potential risks in perspective and not to let these overshadow the positive benefits of mobile phones

Things to consider when choosing an appropriate chat room include:

- Display of safety messages in chat rooms
- Age appropriate chat rooms
- Extent of moderation (human or a program-based monitoring of the content of chat based conversations)
- Use of filtering programs
- Advise children not to give out their mobile number to chat friends without talking to you about this first
- Explain why it is important to withhold personal information – for example, because it enables another person to contact or locate your child in the real world
- Advise children on how to deal with cyber flirting (conversations of a sexual nature) – a very common feature of chat. Highlight that it is perfectly OK to terminate a conversation or to tell someone "I would prefer not to talk about that"

Real world meetings

It is important that children understand that arranging a face-to-face meeting with chat friends is a big step and should be avoided unless their parents or carers are involved.

Rules both you and your children should follow if they do decide to meet someone with your consent:

- Always take an adult to a meeting
- Always meet in a public place
- Always inform your parents or carers who, when, and where you are meeting

Online friendships

There are some key behaviours that have been identified as typical of online users with a negative manner. Children should consider some of the following things in relation to their online friendships:

Has the other chatter ever been dishonest or untruthful?

For example, have they claimed to be 14 years old one day and 18 the next?

Secret friendships are not a good idea

Your children should tell you about all their online friends and they should tell you if someone has asked to keep the friendship a secret.

Some chatters may ask your child questions of a personal nature

Discuss with your child the boundaries they should have with respect to the information they divulge.

Be aware that online chatters may pester your child for a phone number, picture, or to meet up in the real world

It may be a good idea to discuss these scenarios with your child in advance so they are prepared to deal with such requests.

Encourage your child to recognise that if they have some doubts about the nature of a chat friendship that they can discuss their concerns with you. Remember to apply good parenting skills as you do in the real world with other aspects of your child's life.

Useful phrases

The following are examples of phrases that you can encourage your child to feel comfortable using in order to help them to manage conversations with chat friends:

“I am not allowed to give out my phone number, email address, home address, photo, or the name of my school”

“Knowing someone on the Internet is not the same as knowing them in the real world”

“Chat friends are only for chat rooms!”

Further information

It is important to advise children that in the event of anything untoward occurring they can also:

- Report to O₂
- Dial 100 from your mobile
- Call 0113 388 6107 from any other phone
- Report to teachers and trusted adults
- Report abuse to the Police



Checklist for children:

Remind your children that they have rights when they use the Internet.

- I can quit talking to someone in a chat room any time I want to
- I will only give chat friends information that I have agreed with my parents is OK to tell
- I don't have to give chat friends any information I'm not happy to pass on even if they try and pressure me
- I won't send a picture either of myself or of a friend, to a chat friend, or put up a picture of myself in my chat room public profile
- I won't give out either my own or a friend's mobile number to a chat friend
- I will be vague about my location (e.g. I live in the UK)
- I will always tell my parents/guardian about any problems I have with people I meet on the Internet
- I will think carefully before accepting files from other people and sending files to others
- I will save any text messages, emails or chat conversations that prove someone is treating me badly or pestering me
- I will enjoy using my mobile phone but think carefully every time I contact someone I only know through the Internet

