

SEARCHING THE INTERNET & CHILD SAFETY

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & CARERS ON HOW TO HELP CHILDREN SEARCH SAFELY

CHILDREN AND SEARCH

With ever increasing amounts of material – websites, images, video etc - on the internet, searching carefully is crucial, but how can parents and carers help children search safely? This guide will help you.

Most children use search engines to find things on the Internet. In fact research¹ has found that search providers' sites are the most visited sites among the majority of children and young people. In addition to the incredible positives and benefits that search brings, for example helping to research for school assignments, there is a risk to children searching the Internet of exposure to material that may be potentially harmful to them, or even material that is illegal.

This document aims to help parents in their choice of search provider by using a checklist of questions to outline what is current good practice in relation to child safety for search providers, and to enable parents to be aware of what they can do to help their children search safer.

This document is a summary of the full document, 'Good practice guidance for search service providers and advice to the public on how to search safely', published by the Home Office in December 2005. All the main search providers in the UK contributed to this document to help identify and outline what is good practice for providing search in relation to child safety as well as drawing up information for parents about search. See www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/search-and-advice-public?view=Binary.

SEARCH: WHAT IS IT?

Search engines enable the rapid search of the Internet for information, whether this information be text, image or sound. Searching consists of entering a word or words into a search box and clicking the search button, which sets in motion a search engine that automatically produces a list of the addresses of websites relevant to the words entered. Many search providers also offer the facility for the user to search for images, video and audio content.

WHO PROVIDES SEARCH?

Examples of popular search providers include; Google, Lycos, AOL, MSN, Yahoo, Wanadoo, the BBC, Tiscali, Ask, and Vodafone.

To search you need to go to the search provider's website or use a previously downloaded search toolbar. These can be accessed via computer, mobile, or other online devices.

SEARCH RESULTS

Search results are the list of links that are returned following a search enquiry. There are two types of search results: automated results and sponsored listings. Automated results are produced automatically by the search engine, without human intervention. Sponsored listings are results that are paid to appear after certain searches by companies wanting to publicise their product or service.

¹ Research has told us that search engines are the most visited websites among 71% of young people. 71% of 9-19 year-olds who go online at least weekly, see the study UK Children Go Online, www.children-go-online.net.

A PARENTS GUIDE TO SEARCH AND SEARCH PROVIDERS

1) SAFETY ADVICE FOR SAFER SEARCHING

KEY QUESTION:

Where can I find information and advice about how to search 'safer'?

SEARCH PROVIDERS SHOULD...

All search providers should provide prominent and easily accessible safety advice for users when they are undertaking a search. This advice should cover:

- how to conduct safer searches,
- how to set up and use any filtering options,
- how to report unwanted and potentially illegal search results.

If you cannot see such advice, then e-mail the search provider as they are committed to providing it. The search provider should also have links to other online safety guides.

Some quick tips for safer search

- The more accurate your search is (ie using more than one relevant word), the more relevant the search results will be and thus the less likely that unwanted results will be prominently returned. For example, if you are searching for information on the planet Mercury, entering 'planet mercury' into the search box will get more relevant results than just entering 'Mercury'.
- Take care to spell correctly when typing in a search. Even a small typing error can bring up unwanted results.
- Remember that not all the information in websites returned in searches is reliable. There are things you can do to assess the quality of the information you find (see www.quick.org.uk for example).
- There are two types of search results, (see above for more information on this):
 - Automated search results and
 - sponsored listings

Search providers usually separate and label these two types of search results, but it is important that you are aware of the difference and can differentiate them in the results of the search provider you are using.

- Whichever search provider you chose, it is important that you familiarise yourself with this provider's service, finding out about the search provider's safety advice, the search provider's filter, how to contact the search provider, and how sponsored listings are differentiated from other search results.

2) FILTERING OUT SEARCH RESULTS THAT ARE POTENTIALLY HARMFUL FOR CHILDREN

KEY QUESTIONS:

- Does the search provider provide a filter?
- Is the filter switched on?
- How do I know the filter is on or not?
- Do I have to switch it on every time I use it, or will it remember my settings?

SEARCH PROVIDERS SHOULD...

Search Providers should provide a filtered service.

Most search providers operating in the UK provide an option for filtering searches, ie for not returning results in the search that are potentially harmful for children. These filters are free and most search providers have these set to 'on' automatically. However, if the filter is not already set 'on' they can be activated by simply clicking a box.

It is good practice for search providers to make it clear to someone about to make a search what the filter setting is – in other words, while you are on the search homepage you should be able to tell if the filter is on or off. If it is not immediately clear, you will need to click on a link or tab near to the search box called 'Options', 'Preferences', 'Advanced', 'Help' or 'Settings' to check if the filter is on or not.

Safety tips

- Familiarise yourself with the filter of the search provider you and your children are using. Finding the filter and finding out about the filter should be simple, but if you cannot locate it or are unable to tell if it is 'switched on', then find another search provider where it is more user-friendly.
- Some search provider filters will remember settings between search sessions, but others will not. Check with the search provider about this. If it is not clear what the filter setting is when you return to search, you will need to click on the 'Options' tab to check.
- Some search providers also use warning pages to help protect users from accidental exposure to 'adult' material. These warning or 'splash' pages warn users that they are about to receive results which may contain or link to potentially harmful material. These pages will not prevent a user accessing any sites, but it can enable the user to make an informed decision on whether to access 'adult' material. E-mail and check with your search provider about their policy on such warning pages.
- Installing filtering software on your computer is another way of helping to protect your child using the internet from potentially harmful material. Websites such as www.getnetwise.org offer more information about the different types of filtering tools that are available on the market.
- There are some search providers aimed specifically at children, whose results have been vetted as suitable for children. The BBC offer such a service at www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/search. Other such services are listed in Annex B of the main search document ³, though these are mostly US-based and thus the results would be US-centred.

³ See www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/search-and-advice-public?view=Binary

3) WHAT HAPPENS IF I COME ACROSS...

a) ... potentially harmful material in search results

We know that no filter is 100% effective, and that children do accidentally come across inappropriate material online. Reassure your children so they feel able to come to you if they come across material on the Internet that makes them feel uncomfortable

KEY QUESTION:

How do I contact the search provider if things go wrong?

SEARCH PROVIDERS SHOULD...

It is good practice for search providers to provide their users with a clear, prominent and easily accessible reporting facility. The reporting process should be simple and there should be explanations about what type of material to report.

Material that is considered to be 'Potentially harmful' to children includes pornographic or violent images or text in the search results.

If you access potentially harmful material while the filter was switched on, then you should report this to the search provider. In the report you will need to include the website address where you encountered this material and the search term that was typed in to get this result.

b) ... illegal material in search results

KEY QUESTIONS:

Where do I report illegal material?
How can I reduce the likelihood of coming across such material?

Most search providers are taking steps, by working with the UK's national hotline the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), to block illegal content from the results for searches. If you come across content during a search that you consider to be illegal – such as child abuse images or racist content – then you should report this to the IWF, www.iwf.org.uk.

If you are unsure, then report it to your search provider who can then contact the relevant authority on your behalf.

SEARCH PROVIDERS SHOULD...

It is good practice for search providers to offer the user a choice between a UK only or a World wide search. You are less likely to return illegal content in your searches by selecting a UK only search as opposed to a World Wide Web search because sites hosted in the UK are subject to UK law and are thus easier to police. Currently less than 0.4% of websites which the IWF has assessed to contain illegal material is hosted in the UK, thus if the search is only for UK only sites there is less likelihood of returning illegal material. However, this will mean that sites which are hosted in other countries, but which are relevant to your search will be excluded too.