

How to build a safe online environment for children during covid-19 pandemic

Due to the gravity of Covid-19, we have witnessed widespread closure of schools and physical distancing measures across the world that have caused adults and children to create 'the new norm' through online platforms. Following the spread of the pandemic, internet usage has increased tremendously to support children's online learning, socialization and play. Yes, the internet, mobile phones and other digital media provide children and young people with access to information, communication and entertainment, however, it may also increase kids' exposure to online risks such as cyberbullying, online predators, scams, inappropriate websites and malware.

Globally, in comparison to their parents, children tend to have more skills, understanding, and maneuver easily on the internet exposing children to dangers adults may overlook. With that said, building a safe online environment for children requires collaborative action by parents, governments, social workers and school authorities.

What can be done by national governments and school authorities?

A. Reinforce governmental prevention and response to online dangers

Governments should enforce new and existing legislation, backed by law enforcement to help monitor and respond to increased online risks. They should also increase educational initiatives on child online safety through media and other communication channels.

B. Reducing access to harm

Governments should work together with the information technology industry to ensure that measures (such as easy to use safety features on mobile phones, laptops etc) have been put in place to protect children from online dangers.

C. Support parents to ensure safety of their children

The government should provide parents and caregivers with guidance on how to report and respond to online inappropriate content and online predators. In instances where a child experiences online harm, it is important that they have necessary counselling to promote their recovery and rehabilitation. Moreover, children should be equipped with information needed to navigate safely and make informed choices on their online lives

D. Provide safe online learning experiences

Schools should revise their safeguarding policies to reflect the situation of children learning from home, monitor and regulate interactions between teachers and students. School authorities should adapt anti-bullying rules to online platforms and communicate them to students and teachers.

What can parents do?

A. Establish limits on internet use

Explain to your children why some sites are inappropriate and what sites they can or can't visit. Find a balance between online time and other activities. It would also be helpful to pin or bookmark their favorite sites on the browser to avoid visiting other sites.

B. Open communication

Discuss with your kids the different dangers there are on the internet and instruct them to tell you about any incident that makes them feel uncomfortable or harassed.

C. Monitor online activities

Monitor your kids online activities religiously; ask them details about their online friends, go through their browser history, use parental monitoring software and use the apps that they are using.

D. Prevent unwanted exposure

Always check privacy policies for your child's sites before they sign up and change account accessibility settings to private to prevent friend requests from strangers. Help your child to fill out online profiles, let them use nicknames and make it clear that they should not share their personal information.

Lady Askari, in conjunction with our community partners SheHacksKE and Protect Us Kids Foundation, is available to do online child protection webinars to help parents and guardians keep children safe as they use technology. For more information about our online child protection program, contact us at childprotection@ladyaskari.com

