

Digital grandparenting

What do grandparents need to know to help young people stay safer online?



Many of the more than 14 million grandparents in the UK are actively involved in their grandchildren's lives. Whether they're a now-and-again babysitter, a regular carer or even if they live many miles away, what role can they play in keeping their beloved grandchildren safer in their digital world?

Facebook, smartphones and tablets aren't just for the young. Lots of grandparents are using the internet and other digital technologies to support their hobbies, build friendships and stay in touch with their families.

In a survey conducted by Vodafone in 2011, a tenth of the UK-based grandparents interviewed said they use technology every day to make contact with their grandchildren and more than a quarter (29%) revealed that they might feel isolated from their family if they didn't have access to the internet. From text messages and email to webcams and sharing photos on social networking sites, it's all helping to bring grandparents and grandchildren closer.

For the millions of grandparents who help look after their grandchildren,

there are other reasons why technology simply cannot be ignored. Whether they're in charge for a few hours, while mum and dad are out for the evening, a weekend here and there or every day while the child's parents are at work, it's important that grandparents understand the kind of gadgets and websites that young people enjoy so that they can support them and help them stay safer when they're in their care. And with the rise of smartphones like the iPhone and BlackBerry giving young people a mini-computer in their pocket 24/7, it's even more important to know what's going on.

Even the most tech-savvy grandparents might have concerns about what their grandchildren are doing on the internet, mobiles and other devices and, when it comes to the times that they're

Did you know?

The childcare provided by grandparents in the UK has been valued at **£3.9 billion**

(Source: Grandparents Plus)

'Grandparents' checklist

Here are a few tips to help you get more involved in your grandchildren's digital lives...

- ✓ **TAKE** an interest in how your grandchildren use digital technologies – talk to them about their favourite websites, hobbies and games and who their online friends are
- ✓ **DO** fun stuff together, like playing games on their Wii or watching TV programmes on BBC iPlayer, and ask them to show you the websites they like – they'll no doubt enjoy sharing their tech know-how with you
- ✓ **TALK** to them regularly about their experiences in the digital world (both good and bad), so that they can build their confidence and know they can turn to you if something upsets or troubles them
- ✓ **ENCOURAGE** them to share any worries or difficult experiences with an adult they trust, such as a parent, teacher or you – some children find it easier to talk to a grandparent than other adults so they'll appreciate your offer of support
- ✓ **FIND OUT** from their parents what technology rules they have in place at home (e.g. how much time they are allowed to spend on the internet or their games console) so that you can also stick to them when your grandchildren are with you – your son or daughter might not have even thought about such rules (in which case, giving them a copy of this magazine might be a good way to get the conversation started) or they might just have forgotten to tell you about them
- ✓ **PUT** passwords or PINS on your own computer, mobile and other devices if you think your grandchildren might use them when they come to visit. Make sure your grandchildren don't know your passwords or PINs (e.g. your Wi-Fi password or mobile PIN) as they might be tempted to break the rules
- ✓ **MAKE** the most of tools like Parental Controls on computers, mobiles and games consoles and safety options on Google and other search engines for when they are at your house – take a look at our 'How to' guides for more information
- ✓ **TAKE** the things you might already be teaching your grandchildren in the real world and apply them to the digital world – like the importance of being kind and considering other people's feelings
- ✓ **REMEMBER**, even very young children use technology so it's never too early to encourage them to use it safely and responsibly... it's better to get them into good habits as quickly as possible
- ✓ **DON'T** wait until something goes wrong – help them develop the skills they need to take care of themselves (just as you would if you were teaching them to cross the road by themselves)
- ✓ **IF** you discover something that worries you, it might be difficult to know what to do but it's better to take steps to find out more rather than ignore it. You could start by talking to your grandchild and agreeing with them what to do next, such as talking to their parents. If you're still worried, you can email [The Parent Zone](mailto:help@theparentzone.co.uk) for advice at help@theparentzone.co.uk
- ✓ **HAVE** a good look through the rest of this magazine – it contains lots of important information but we recommend you start with our *Spotlight on Age* (page 6) and *Spotlight on Digital Spaces* (page 10) articles



under the grandparents' roof, it can be particularly tricky knowing what rules are already in place and how to help if something goes wrong.

"It's normal to worry about your grandchildren and the digital world," says Geraldine Bedell, editor of Gransnet, the social networking site for grandparents. "For one thing, young people might think they are better with technology than we are – it's one of the few areas where our wisdom is not in demand. For another, most grandparents want to be the fun people in the family, not the boring old heavy-handed makers of rules."

Grandparents' digital concerns often mirror those of their own children. Of the grandparents who spoke to Vodafone, around a quarter are worried that their

grandson or granddaughter could be meeting strangers online (25%) or accessing inappropriate content on the internet (24%). Other concerns might include young people giving away too much personal information online, being bullied and spending too much time in front of a screen.

For the great majority of kids for the vast majority of the time, the digital world will be a source of harmless fun, creativity and learning, so it's important to stay upbeat and positive about it. At the same time, grandparents can play an incredibly important role – as an extra pair of eyes and ears, a guide and a confidant. ■

If you'd like to pass this article on to your child's grandparents, simply go to www.vodafone.com/parents to save it as a PDF that you can email or print.