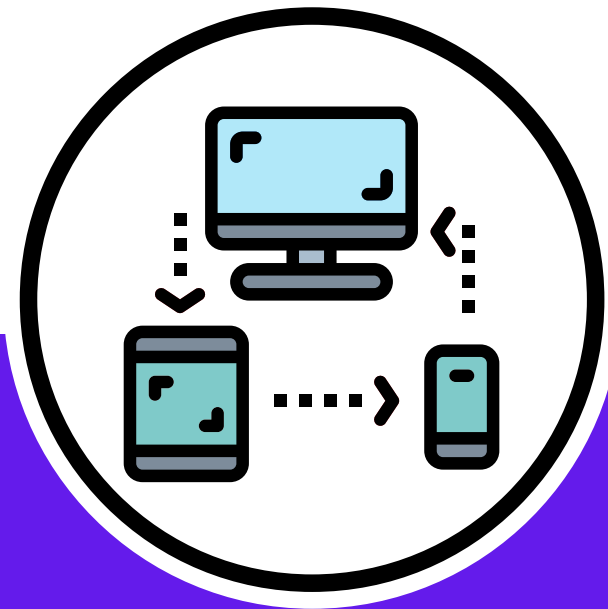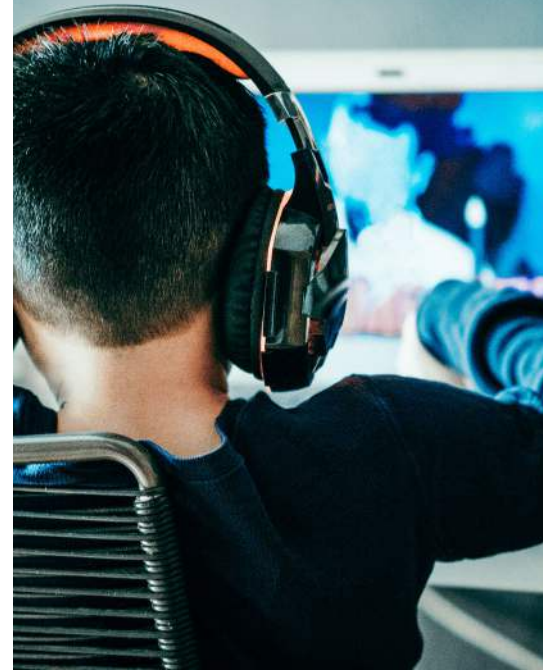ConnectSafely

FAMILY GUIDE TO
Parental Controls

- **Advice for Parents, by Parents**
- **Thoughts About Monitoring & Filtering Software**
- **Screen-Time Limits**
- **What Parental Controls Can't Do**
- **Talking to Kids About Devices**

What's Inside

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What are parental controls and what do they do?

There are a variety of control tools and monitoring tools available to parents. Some are software products or mobile apps that you buy or subscribe to. Others are free and some are already present on your phone, tablet or computer operating systems or available from your internet service provider. Some extensions work within popular browsers to limit access to certain types of content. There are internet routers and gateways that offer controls across your entire network. Some apps and sites have their own parental controls.

Depending on the product, these tools can:

- Filter out (block) inappropriate websites & other content
- Limit the ability to download or purchase apps or certain types of apps
- Monitor and report on sites or apps a child uses
- Monitor what your child is posting or viewing on social media
- Monitor and/or limit what your child can type or is exposed to, such as cyberbullying or hate speech
- Limit total screen time or screen time of specific apps or types of apps
- Limit the ability to watch videos, movies or TV shows based on age ratings
- Block music with inappropriate lyrics
- Control the use and access of certain devices on your home network
- Limit what a child can find using a search engine
- Ask a child or teen to rethink what they're about to send or post if it may be inappropriate or hurtful to others.

Should I install internet filtering or monitoring software?

Filters can usually prevent young children from accidentally stumbling on troubling or inappropriate material, but they are less effective at keeping older kids and teens from deliberately visiting blocked sites. There are several ways to get around filters, including using another computer, mobile phone, or tablet that's not filtered. Whether and how to use filtering and monitoring tools is a parental decision that should be based on your understanding of what's best for your child.

There are some children and teens who need very strict controls and others who can do just fine without them, based on conversations and adherence to household rules. Only you know what's best for your child.

Monitoring tools can inform parents of what their kids are doing but some kids — especially teens — feel that it's an invasion of their privacy and many would argue that it's not necessary or helpful. When it comes to monitoring tools, another risk is "too much information." Do you really want to look at every text message and review every website your child visits?

Every family must make its own decision based on a number of factors including:

- The child's age and maturity
- The child's sensitivity to certain types of content that may be "appropriate" but still upsetting
- The child's propensity to take risks
- The child's impulse control
- The child's willingness to adhere to family rules
- The parent's values and concerns over types of content and activities
- Any special circumstances or needs that affect your child

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How to chose a filtering or monitoring product

The first thing you should do is consider what, if anything, you need for your child. Do you want to block age-inappropriate sites, do you want to restrict what apps they can download, do you want to protect them from being cyberbullied or bullying others? Do you want to know what your kids are doing online and, if so, how much information do you want? Some programs will give you nearly everything; others give you a summary, and some just flag what they consider to be troublesome content or behavior.

Before you spend money, check out the tools that may already be controls on your devices or available from the maker of your device or operating system.

Free family-friendly tools and apps include:

- Amazon Kids+ Parental Controls (Fire tablets and other Amazon devices)
- Apple: Parental controls for iOS (iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch)
- Apple: Screen Time on Mac
- Google Family Link (Free for Android devices as a download)
- Microsoft: Controls for Windows 10 & Xbox
- YouTube Kids, Messenger Kids, TikTok Family Pairing

There are of course many third-party tools, some are free and others cost money. ConnectSafely does not recommend specific tools, but here are links to credible independent sources for reviews of parental control tools:

- CNET: Best apps to put on kids' phones to keep them safe
- Common Sense Media: Parents' Ultimate Guide to Parental Controls
- ConsumerAdvocate.org: Top 10 Parental Control Apps of 2021
- Digitaltrends: The best parental control apps for Android and iOS
- PC Mag: The Best Parental Control Software (updated annually)
- PC World: Screen Time, Family Link, and FreeTime vs my 7-year-old son: Which parental controls are best?
- Tom's Guide: The best parental control apps for Android and iPhone 2021

Network–level control devices

Many internet service providers have parental control options as part of the settings for their gateways (a single device that includes both an internet modem and a router) or other devices. There are also third-party routers and devices that work with PCs, game consoles, phones and any other devices that are either hardwired or connected by WiFi to your home network. These devices, however, may not work if

your child's device has a cellular connection that doesn't require access to the home network. The service you already use may offer these controls and — if you have a third-party router — check with that company's website to see if they offer parental controls.

Shared devices

It's not uncommon for two or more family members to have access to the same device. Many devices, including Macs, Windows PCs, Android phones and TV streaming devices, allow you to create more than one account so that you can have different settings for different users. Other controls have passwords that enable adults or older children to bypass controls. Check with your device maker's or operating system's website for instructions to see what options are available.

Screen–time limits

There are apps that you can use to limit how much time your child spends on a device or a service. Some are built-into devices themselves and others are part of services, apps or games aimed at children. These limits can help you control not only how much time a child spends using the device but the time-of-day as well, allowing you to set a "bed-time" for when the device must be turned off. These tools can be useful, especially with younger children, but should always be part of a larger discussion about the use of devices and media. Many parental control tools offer screen time manager as one of their features.

Stealth mode

While many don't even allow parents to secretly control or monitor their child's online behavior, some apps can run in "stealth mode" so that the child may not be aware

The best web filter is the one located between the child's ears and it lasts a lifetime.

that they're in use. Except in very rare situations, we at ConnectSafely don't recommend the use of stealth mode. As a general rule, it's a good idea to talk with your kids about the controls and why you're using them. Besides, your child will likely figure out it's there anyway and if you do find something that concerns you, you don't want their first response to be "why are you spying on me." It's better to get that out of the way at the beginning.

What about parental controls built-into services and apps?

Some social media services and apps have their own controls, such as limiting the type of content your child can see or who your child can interact with. Sometimes these controls kick in automatically depending on your child's age, while others give parents the ability to manage or even monitor their child's experience with that service. It's a good idea to look at the service's default settings for your child's age group and see if you wish to adjust it if possible. Because of these safeguards, it's important that children be honest about their age because they may not be available or they may be different if the service doesn't know your child's age.

Beyond parental controls, most social media apps and services have settings to control privacy and security, who you interact with and more. Parents should talk with their kids about these controls and what is appropriate for their children. For more, check out ConnectSafely's Parent's Guides and Quick Guides to popular apps and services.

Safe searching

Google offers SafeSearch and Bing has its own feature to restrict the sites you can find. These settings do a generally good job at restricting what your child can find in a search but they're not perfect and they only work on the search engines where they are configured.
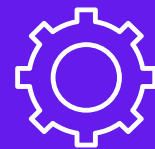
It's a good idea to talk with your kids about the controls and why you're using them.

Streaming, TV and internet video

Most streaming services and devices also let parents control the type of content their kids can watch. Check with both your streaming device such as Roku, Apple TV and Amazon Fire TV, as well as services you subscribe to for what controls they offer. Also, be aware that YouTube and other online video services have content that may be inappropriate for your child. You can block the entire service or, in some cases, specific types of videos or you can restrict your kids to only child-friendly services like YouTube Kids or other family-friendly brands like Amazon Kids, Disney and PBSKids.

What parental control tools can't do

Parental control tools only work on devices, networks or services where they are installed. They likely won't work if your child logs on away from home on someone else's device and network-level controls may not work if a child connects via a cellular network or a WiFi network away from home. And, while parental controls can be used as part of your efforts to teach your children good online habits, they are not a substitute for parenting and don't — on their own — typically teach the important traits of self-control, critical thinking and consideration for others. They also don't work once a child grows up and away from their parents, which is why it's so important to teach and reinforce critical thinking skills and self-control.

Be a good role model

How you act in front of your children can have a bigger impact than on what tools you're using or what you say. It's fine to put time-limits on your children's use of technology but make sure they don't see you over-using your technology, especially during family time when you should be interacting with them.

Weaning from filters

Your child will be an adult before you know it and it will be up to them — not you — to regulate what they do and how they act online. If you use filters or monitoring tools, think about how to wean your kids away from them as they get older and more responsible. Some products give parents the ability to gradually loosen up controls or monitoring as a child matures. As children get into their teen years, consider loosening up or removing any filters or monitoring products, especially if they're older teens who will soon be on their own and fully responsible for their own online and offline behavior.

Closing thoughts for parents

When it comes to parenting, one-size definitely doesn't fit all. Most of our advice here is for average kids with average risk but there are kids whose needs are different who may require stronger controls or monitoring. As with most parenting decisions, you need to think about your specific child and specific needs as well as your own risk tolerance.

Ultimately, the only filter that can fully protect your child for life isn't the one that runs on a computer or a phone but the one that runs in the software between their ears. It's important to teach critical thinking skills and media literacy to help children make good decisions on and offline now and as they mature. With any luck, your child will grow up, become independent and maybe even move away from home, so — ultimately — it's important they develop their own controls rather than relying on those imposed by parents or schools.

About ConnectSafely

ConnectSafely is a Silicon Valley, California-based nonprofit organization dedicated to educating users of connected technology about safety, privacy and security. We publish research-based safety tips, parents' guidebooks, advice, news and commentary on all aspects of tech use and policy.