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Tackling online hate: What you need to know

If you've completed the [Tackling online hate interactive quiz](#) or just want to learn more about the topic, this summary advice and guidance can help you make the online world a little more positive.

Use it on your own or together with friends or family to build your understanding and help stop online hate.



1. What does it mean to have ‘freedom of expression’?

What you need to know

Have you ever seen a controversial or hateful opinion on social media? Or in news stories talking about this happening? Oftentimes, people spreading hate online claim they have the ‘right to free speech’ and think that means they can say what they like without consequence. However, ‘freedom of expression’ or free speech simply means that if you say something against the UK government, you cannot be imprisoned. Free speech gives people the right to criticise their government without prosecution.

Social media and gaming platforms all have their own Terms of Service and community guidelines, most of which ban hate speech. So, if someone says something ‘controversial’ that is hateful or continues to spread online hate, the platform has every right to block their words or ban them. This keeps all users safe and helps encourage positive behaviour in all spaces.



For parents & carers

The term ‘free speech’ comes up a lot on social media. A report from Ofcom (2022) found that 57% of teenagers get their news from social media, which means they are likely to come across the stories around what free speech means. Legally, the term refers to the right of individuals to speak out against their government without fear of prosecution. However, on social media, it has taken on the meaning of saying whatever one wants, even if it’s hateful, without being banned from a platform.

Discuss with your child what ‘free speech’ means to them and explore their favourite platforms with them to learn what the community guidelines or Terms of Service say about what is and isn’t okay to share. This will help them understand that there are consequences for our words and will help them understand when it’s time to report a user.

[Learn more about popular apps and platforms](#) along with what they do to keep their communities safe.

Discuss these questions

- *Had you ever heard the terms ‘freedom of expression’ or ‘free speech’ before? How were they used?*
- *Think of sites you visit or platforms you use. Have you witnessed online hate on these platforms that resulted in a ban? If not, why do you think that is?*
- *Even if you believe that people should be able to say what they want, what problems can this cause in the online space?*
- *How might the claims of ‘free speech’ alongside online hate impact you or others you know?*

2. Of the following characteristics, which are considered to be protected characteristics (i.e., those that are illegal to discriminate against)?

What you need to know

Protected characteristics include:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment (transition from the sex they were assigned at birth to the one they identify as)
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex (being male, female or nonbinary)
- sexual orientation (the sex someone is attracted to. For example, a man attracted to a man)

'Protected' means it is against the law for people or companies to treat you differently or take away opportunities because of these characteristics.

Companies found to do this will be held legally accountable and fined.

Many online platforms may also include some of these characteristics as protected by their own rules.

For example, it is against TikTok's community guidelines for content that "attacks, threatens, incites violence against or otherwise dehumanises an individual or group on the basis of" race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender, and more. They even include other characteristics not necessarily considered 'protected characteristics.'

Each platform has their own variation, so it's important to explore what these are so you know when something needs to be reported. However, remember that you can always make a report even if you're not sure. The moderators will decide whether or not the content breaks their guidelines or terms of service.

For parents & carers

While teens may not know about every protected characteristic, they will likely have some knowledge about things that are illegal to discriminate against. They might even have a good idea about how their favourite social media platforms deal with online hate against these groups. So, ask them. Do they understand what should be reported and how to identify online hate against these groups when they see it?

Encourage them to take charge and report hateful content. Remind them that the person won't know they reported them, and that it could go a long way towards protecting both friends and strangers online, which will help create a more positive space.

Make regular conversations about their digital lives a normal part of your time together to keep on top of issues that might come up.

Discuss these questions

- *Think of your favourite social media or gaming platform (or favourite website). What do the community guidelines say about online hate?*
- *Have you ever reported online hate that you saw? Why or why not?*
- *If you've ever experienced online hate because of one of these characteristics, what steps, if any, did you take to get support?*
- *Remember that you don't have to deal with online hate on your own. If you've reported and blocked the user but still need someone to talk to, consider speaking with a trusted adult such as a parent or carer, teacher or school counsellor or even to an online counsellor through Childline or The Mix to get support anonymously.*

3. Which of the following acts include legislation that helps protect against online hate?

What you need to know

While some of these laws are quite old, they include material that make certain actions online illegal.

Malicious Communications Act (1988): This act makes it an offence to share electronic communication that is indecent, offensive, threatening or intentionally misleading. A person who is guilty could be convicted and imprisoned.

Computer Misuse Act (1990): Under this act, a person is guilty of an offence if they do anything unauthorised on a computer (which includes smartphones) that causes harm to human welfare that leads to death or injury. This can include online hate that leads someone to self-harm.

Protection from Harassment Act (1997): While this act isn't solely related to computers, it does make it an offence to harass others. This includes any speech that causes alarm, distress or fear of violence and can apply to both online and offline language.

Communications Act (2003): This act makes it an offence to send offensive or threatening messages online or causing someone else to do the same. If someone sends something to purposely cause "annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety" under this act, it could result in imprisonment.

The Online Safety Bill, which is still being discussed in Government, aims to create stronger protections for person under 18 alongside the [Age-Appropriate Design Code](#). This is likely to include laws that require platforms to take action against illegal activity that might harm children and teens while also requiring more protection against harms such as bullying. It also aims to make reporting this content a lot easier. Keep an eye out for the Online Safety Bill in the news to see how it might affect you!

For parents & carers

While your teen might understand that certain actions online or off might be against the law, they might not know the specifics. However, it's good to discuss what these laws are and how they could impact someone guilty of certain online offences.

It can also be a good way for them to understand why, when bullied or when experiencing online hate, it's a good idea to take and save screenshots as a way to collect evidence of repeated behaviour.



Discuss these questions

- *When it comes to laws online, what do you think is important for the government or platforms to enforce?*
- *Were you aware of these laws before this question? Does it change how you think of the content you see online?*
- *Most of the acts are twenty or more years old. Do you think anything needs to be updated for modern users?*
- *Have you ever seen or experienced bullying or online hate? How did you handle it? Did you reach out to anyone?*

4. While playing video games online, someone's close friend publicly calls them a racial slur after their team loses. What is this an example of?

What you need to know

Sometimes we say things to our friends that we would never say to anyone else because of the shared trust. However, that doesn't mean hateful language, slurs, bullying or other unhealthy behaviours is okay. This is even more true when it comes to a public online space.

Slurs about race, religion, LGBTQ+ or any other group is hate regardless of who it comes from and needs to be stopped. In public digital spaces, others can see or hear comments between friends, which helps online hate spread if we aren't careful.

Keep your conversations private online and stand up to friends using hateful language by telling them it's wrong.

For parents & carers

A lot of time, young people misunderstand and misuse the term 'banter'. They might think that a joke between friends is a joke even if it uses hateful language, which isn't true. Using slurs is part of a bigger problem where a child thinks something is acceptable when it isn't. It's important to challenge slurs, bullying and hateful language when you hear or see it, and your child must be encouraged to do the same to avoid the trap of becoming desensitised to online hate.

Talk with your teen about what is and isn't acceptable among their friendship group and help them find the courage to speak out when they see or hear something hateful online.



Discuss these questions

- *Desensitisation happens when someone sees so much harmful content that it is no longer shocking. Instead, it feels normal. This might relate to online hate but can also relate to violence and pornography. Have you witnessed desensitisation on social media or in video games (whether among your friends or strangers)?*
- *What is the danger of desensitisation when it comes to something like online hate?*
- *Is there anything you have become desensitised to? What could you do to tackle this?*

5. Sometimes really close friends and siblings ‘banter’ with each other for laughs. What problems could banter cause in some relationships?

What you need to know

While social media algorithms can be great at suggesting content that we really like, it can be risky too. If, for example, you watch a video from a racist creator that has nothing to do with race and that you ‘like’, you will start to see more videos from this creator. Those suggested videos will likely include the racist content you’d want to avoid. You might also receive suggestions for similar creators until your entire feed is filled with racism and hate.

When our social feeds only contain one type of content or point of view, it creates what is called an echo chamber. Imagine you’re in a cave that echoes. If someone shouts a hateful comment against a woman, you’ll hear it echo off the walls. Then, if someone else repeats the hate, it echoes again until all you hear is the hate. Social media works the same way. If someone shares or likes hateful content, they’ll see more of it and less of any opposing views. This means that they might not believe there are opposing views so are unable to move past their hate.

We see this a lot in incel communities. A young man might share they are sad about not having a girlfriend, so men in similar situations start sharing misinformed or hateful content about women, which the young man starts to believe. Without a balanced view of the world, he can’t think critically about the information in front of him.

You can probably think of other echo chamber examples caused by social media algorithms; they’re unfortunately widespread.

The best way to stop echo chambers from happening is by first reporting hateful content on whatever platform you’re using and then by also sharing opposing points of view that challenge the online hate. Share reputable sources to create a balanced, unbiased view but don’t engage in arguments.

Additionally, following a range of people with different points of view can help show you a range of ideas. When you come across content that you don’t support, you can mark it as not for you using the platforms’ tools so you don’t see related content again.

For parents & carers

Talk with your teen about hate communities they might see online, through social media or news sites. Incel communities and anti-LGBTQ+ communities are just a couple of examples. Discuss with them what information they’re seeing and ask them to consider why people might be falling prey to these sorts of beliefs. How might social media play a part?

[Talk about fake news and misinformation](#) that also plays into creating hateful groups or confused ideas online.

Additionally, help your teen customise the content in their feeds to make sure they aren’t being bombarded by hate through social media algorithms. [Explore these step-by-step guides to popular social platforms](#) to help.

Discuss these questions

- *Think of your experiences on social media or reading news. What hate groups come to mind, if any? Do you see them active offline as well?*
- *What is done among your friends or at school to counter this hate?*
- *What can you do to challenge the content suggested to you through social media algorithms?*
- *What privacy or security features do you use on your accounts to limit your exposure to online hate?*

6. Sometimes hateful things online seem funny to some and offensive to others. If you make a joke that offends someone else online, which of these is the best action to take?

What you need to know

We all make mistakes. As much as you can try to think before you share, sometimes your mouth can move faster than your brain, which might end up creating some problems between both friends and strangers.

If someone calls out your content as hateful, take a breath, review it with an open mind, maybe get a second opinion from someone you trust, and if you realise it is hateful, apologise and delete the content. That's it. You don't need to create an apology video or drag it out any longer than that.

Just make sure you learn from your mistakes and try to avoid the slip up in the future.

And remember: a good apology puts the blame on you, not the person who is offended. So, don't say "I'm sorry if **you** felt that way." Instead, say "I'm sorry for **making you** feel that way."

For parents & carers

Sometimes it can be hard for anyone, not just children, to admit their mistakes and apologise. However, sometimes that's the best thing you can do to make things right. Talk with your child about the actions they can take if they make a tasteless joke online and get called out. Encourage them to delete the content and then speak with you about how they feel. Or, if they don't feel comfortable to talk with you, encourage them to go on sites like [Childline](#) or [Ditch the Label](#) to make use of their forums or to talk with a counsellor on [Childline](#), [The Mix](#) or [Meic](#) (Wales).



Discuss these questions

- *Have you ever said something you regretted (either offline or online)? How did you make it right? Could you have done anything different?*
- *Why might someone respond to criticism with anger instead of understanding?*
- *How could you make sure that the content you post on social media doesn't spread online hate?*
- *If you found a close friend sharing hateful content as a 'joke', how would you tackle it?*

7. What might be some reasons a person is willing to share online but not in person?

What you need to know

Generally, when someone speaks to another person face-to-face, they self-edit what they want to say without even thinking about it. We do it all the time without even realising it! It means we might not say everything we think or, if we do, we will see how it affects the other person pretty quickly.

However, this is less likely to be the case online. When you can't see the person you're targeting or you don't think people you know will see it, it becomes a lot easier to say whatever you want due to feeling like you're anonymous. This is called disinhibition.

That's why it's important to think before you post anything. Take time to re-read what you've written to give yourself a moment to process whether you should share it. Always think:

- Is what you're saying true?
- Is what you're saying kind?
- Is what you're saying necessary?

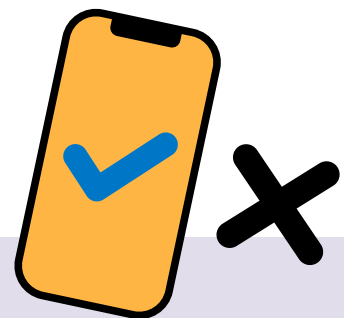
If you can answer 'no' to any of these questions, maybe it's better not to share it.

As always, if you see someone sharing online hate – whether that's because of disinhibition, social media algorithms or any other reason – be sure to report it to the platform you're using to stop others from being impacted.

For parents & carers

Disinhibition is a widespread issue on social media that makes it easier to spread hate online. With young people who have grown up on the internet, it might be a bigger issue, especially if most of their downtime is spent socialising through these platforms. So, keep conversations open about what your teen sees online and what other people are saying.

Encourage them to think carefully before they share anything and model your online use for them to show what you do. You might even want to share with them personal experiences of thinking before you hit 'post' on social media to help them understand.



Discuss these questions

- *Have you ever said anything online that you'd never say in person? Why?*
- *Do you ever feel a little more confident online? How do you show this?*
- *Have you ever written something on social media only to delete it before even posting? Why?*
- *What things can you do to counter online hate posted online due to a user's disinhibition?*

8. If you see online hate of any kind, which of the following actions could you take to help stop it?

What you need to know

Most people know that different platforms have report and block functions but how many actually use them? Sometimes people feel like there's no point in reporting something because nothing will be done, which is an unfortunate thing to feel. However, if you do nothing, that's always a guarantee that nothing will get better.

If you try to stop online hate by reporting, sharing balanced and informative information or by asking a trusted adult for advice, the likelihood that something will change is far greater than if you did nothing at all.

Make use of the platform's safety features and see what they have to offer beyond blocking and reporting. You might also be able to limit who can contact you, what content you see, block certain words or phrases and more. These features will keep you safe but may also help keep others safe for a positive online experience.

You can also use [Report Harmful Content](#) to do this outside of different platforms.

For parents & carers

Talk with your child about what safety features they use on their favourite social media or video games platforms and sites. Better yet, explore with them what features they have available to them. Most times, when a user joins something new, they just want to get into it. Who has time to fiddle about with safety settings? So, taking a moment to guide your child through setting their account up safely will not just help them see less hate online but will also help them take ownership of having safe and positive online experiences.

[Visit all our guides to safety settings on platforms and devices](#) for step-by-step advice.



Discuss these questions

- *How many features does your favourite app or platform have to keep users safe or stop online hate? Explore it again to see if there's anything available that you didn't know about before and share with others. Go to its settings to get started. This is usually found through your profile page.*
- *Which safety features have you used in different apps and platforms? What was the result (if any)?*
- *Sometimes young people might feel silly about sharing something with a trusted adult like a parent or carer. Why do you think that is? Does it apply to you? What would help you feel more comfortable doing this?*

9. A friend makes an insensitive comment in a group chat. What is one action you could take to help them understand why their comment is wrong

What you need to know

For some reason, it often feels harder to tell off our friends when they say something wrong than it is to do the same for strangers. We might worry that they'll get angry or that it will cause stress on your friendship, or we might even worry they won't want to talk anymore. It can be scary.

Still, it's important to call out our friends if they say something hateful, even if it's as a 'joke'. If you let hate speech of any sort slide, then they might think it's okay to keep using that kind of language.

Just remember to approach it from a good place with kindness and information.

If you need further support, explore the forums on Ditch the Label and Childline. Or, if you want to speak with an anonymous counsellor to go through any fall out or arguments you've had with a friend, there are plenty of available helplines like Childline. The Mix and Samaritans to support your mental health and overall wellbeing.

For parents & carers

Bullying among friends happens more than we'd like to think and is often dismissed as banter or not really bullying. The same goes for online hate. If your child's friend is using hateful speech, whether as a joke or with intention to harm, they need to know it isn't okay.

Consider talking to them about empathy and putting themselves in others' shoes. Just because they find something funny, does that mean someone else will? What could hateful language from a friend make someone feel? Talk about the anger, shame and fear a victim might feel. Ask them to consider whether the hate speech their friend uses with them stops with them or could they use it elsewhere online with strangers too?

Challenging online hate among friends will help them understand that it isn't okay, using peer pressure as a tool to benefit the situation.

[How to encourage children to report cyberbullying among friends](#)

Discuss these questions

- *What is something you might struggle with when it comes to confronting a friend about spreading online hate?*
- *How could you get support to confront a friend?*
- *Why if confronting a stranger about their behaviour sometimes easier than doing the same with someone we know?*
- *If you confront a friend and they get angry, what could you do?*

10. How can online spaces be used to stop hate on social media and in video games?

What you need to know

The internet is not a bad thing and can actually be a very positive place, so it's important to challenge negative behaviour that makes people feel unsafe, angry or sad.

Sometimes this means creating a counter-narrative to educate people. Sometimes this means creating communities for support. Sometimes this means sharing helpful information on resources and facts.

There are many positive communities for young people online that provide safe spaces:

[Childline](#): Though it's famous for its helpline, Childline also has a forum that young people can use to talk to others who might be experiencing similar things.

[Ditch the Label](#): This forum allows young people to vent, share interests and get support for a variety of issues they might be struggling with.

[The Mix](#): Discussion boards for anyone under 25 to talk about anything in a safe and moderated community. They also provide small group chats to share what's on your mind, which includes general chats as well as support groups.

Additionally, these resources can help support victims of online hate just like you can with access to so much information across the internet. So, make use of it and challenge online hate.

For parents & carers

It's important to approach the online space just like you would offline spaces – some are positive and supportive, some are not. However, rather than take away access to less positive communities, work with them to find solutions to make it a little more positive and a little safer. What can they do and what tools can they use on the platform?

Encourage them to surround themselves with people who are supportive and content that is positive so they can maintain positive mental health and wellbeing. Empower them to make a change when things aren't going well and to explore safer communities like Ditch the Label and The Mix when they need to.



Discuss these questions

- *What are some communities you use to find support or likeminded people online?*
- *What do you like about these communities? Would you recommend them to someone else?*
- *Are there any resources you use to research factual information that you can share with others to stop online hate? What do you do to make sure it's accurate?*
- *What kind of resources would you recommend to people your age who need support after experiencing online hate?*