# 🛡️ Online Safety for Schools
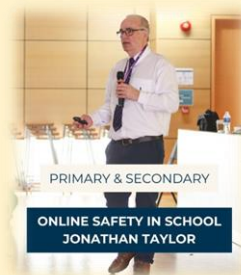
# Best Advice to Keep Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Safe

The core online safety principles **do not change**, but for children and young people with **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)**, the risks can be **greater**, and the advice needs to be more **specific, supportive, and realistic**.

Children with SEND often benefit hugely from online spaces — but may also be more vulnerable to:

- grooming and manipulation
- online bullying and exclusion
- misunderstanding social cues
- obsessive or repetitive use
- trusting strangers too quickly
- difficulty recognising scams, jokes, or harmful intent

So, the guidance becomes more focused on **extra scaffolding, supervision, and communication support**.

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# ✅ Would the advice change?

**The platform settings are mostly the same…**

But the **parent approach** changes in these key ways:

- More direct teaching of "safe rules"
- More repetition and routine
- More supervision for longer
- Stronger boundaries around chat/strangers
- Greater focus on emotional regulation and online dependency

## Key SEND-Specific Online Safety Advice for Parents

## 1. Online friendships feel "more real" for SEND children

Many children with autism, ADHD, or social communication needs may find online interaction easier than face-to-face.

**Risk:** They may trust online "friends" quickly.

**Parent tip:**
Ask: *"Do you know this person offline?"*
Teach a simple rule:
**Online-only people are strangers.**

## 2. SEND children can be more open to grooming tactics

Groomers often target children who are:

- lonely
- socially isolated
- craving attention
- eager to please

SEND children may not spot manipulation.

**Tip for parents:**
Use very clear language:
"If an adult asks you to keep a secret online, that is not safe."

## 3. Literal thinking can increase vulnerability

Children with autism or learning difficulties may take things at face value.

**Examples:**

- believing scams are genuine
- not recognising sarcasm or threats
- thinking "rules don't apply online"

**Tip:**
Teach safety scripts, such as:

- "I don't share personal information."
- "I leave the game if someone is unkind."
- "I tell an adult straight away."

## 4. Hyperfocus and compulsive use is more common

Many SEND children struggle with:

- stopping gameplay
- emotional regulation after screens
- rigid routines

**Parent strategies:**

- Use visual timers
- Agree clear start/stop times
- Build transitions ("5-minute warning")

## 5. Sensory immersion makes VR riskier

For SEND children, VR can feel extremely intense and realistic.

**Risks:**

- distress from harassment
- blurred boundaries between real and virtual
- increased emotional impact

**Advice:**
VRChat and open metaverse spaces are not suitable without close supervision.

## 6. Bullying may be subtle and harder to detect

SEND children may not recognise:

- teasing
- exclusion
- manipulation
- coercion

They may not report it clearly.

**Parent tip:**
Watch for changes in:

- sleep
- mood
- reluctance to go online
- anger after gaming

## 7. Stronger parental controls are appropriate for longer

Parents sometimes worry controls reduce independence.

For SEND children, controls are often a **reasonable adjustment**, not overprotection.

Examples:

- disabling DMs
- limiting chat to friends
- restricting servers
- using Family Link / Family View

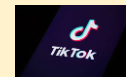# Platform Guidance — What Matters Most for SEND Users

Instead of rewriting every platform, the key SEND focus is:
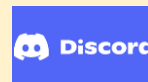
**Games with open chat (Fortnite, Roblox, COD)**

→ Turn off voice chat or limit to known friends.

**Social apps (Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok)**

→ Private accounts, no stranger messaging.

**Discord and group spaces**

→ High grooming risk — strong restrictions needed.

**GTA Online and adult multiplayer spaces**

→ Not appropriate for vulnerable users.

**VR platforms**

→ Avoid unsupervised use completely.

# SEND Parent Handout Questions

These are often more effective than broad questions:

- "Who did you play/talk with today?"
- "Did anyone say anything confusing or upsetting?"
- "Did anyone ask you to move to another app?"
- "Did anyone ask for a photo, your name, or your school?"
- "Do you want me to sit with you while you play sometimes?"
- "What should you do if something feels wrong? Let's practise."

# Best Practice Message for SEND Parents

**Online safety is not about removing access.**
It is about giving children:

- structure
- protection
- predictable rules
- safe enjoyment
- trusted adult support

For SEND children, this often needs to last longer into adolescence.

🌐 Presented by: Jonathan Taylor MSc
    www.onlinesafety4schools.co.uk
✉ onlinesafety4schools@ymail.com

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