

Part of our Online Information Series



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What you need to know about...

SEARCH ENGINES



What is it? 'Search Engine'

A search engine is something that helps you find what you're looking for on the internet. By far the most used and well-known search engine is Google, which powers more than nine out of ten internet searches in the UK, according to Statcounter.com. Search engines can be used to find results such as websites, images and videos, which is where the dangers start to arise.



Know the Risks

Bypassing SafeSearch

Whilst Google has 'SafeSearch', which is designed to filter out explicit content, even by Google's own admission it's not 100% accurate. Inappropriate content can still make it through, even with seemingly innocuous search terms. SafeSearch is very easy to switch off and most teenagers will know how to bypass it.

Accessing blacklisted content

Search engines can be used to access content on sites that are blacklisted by parental control filters. Parental control services should, for example, blacklist the major pornography sites, but search engines might still display images from such sites in their results, without the user having to visit the site itself.

Niche search engines

Google isn't the only search engine out there – there are many niche search engines, some designed specifically to hunt out pornographic or violent content. These aren't always obviously named or blocked by parental control filters, making it difficult for parents to monitor.

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Misleading information

Search engines merely reflect what's on the internet – they rarely filter out misleading or dangerous information. A child searching for solutions to a health problem, for example, might be directed to dangerous treatments.

Keep an Eye on...

Browsing habits

Google and other search engines often leave a trail behind them. For example, search terms entered into Google are normally autosaved in the browser. Similarly, a browser history will reveal which terms a child has been entering into search engines, unless they've been using a private browser mode. If there is no browser history for the time your child has been online, then you might ask why.

Accessing VPNs

Although not strictly search engine related, keep an eye out for VPNs being installed on a family/child's device. Although there are legitimate and innocent uses for VPNs, they can also be a sign that a child is attempting to hide their internet activity or access content that is blocked by parental filters.

SafeSearch settings

Check that Google's SafeSearch remains activated on family computer browsers. Click Settings in the bottom-right corner of the Google home page and SafeSearch filters should be the first option at the top of the screen. It may also be wise to implement protective measures on children's personal devices to ensure they don't stumble across something they shouldn't.

Safety tips

Understand the code

There are ways to force Google to always have SafeSearch on, even if a child knows how to switch it off. These require a little bit of tinkering with code on the computers in your household, but Google provide detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to set this up in their support pages.

Set controls

If your child has their own Android or Apple smartphone or tablet and you're worried they're accessing stuff on Google they shouldn't be, you can use Google's Family Link service to place controls on the child's device. As well as SafeSearch, other safeguards such as controls over YouTube, are allowed on Android devices.

Encourage open dialogue

No matter how many technical barriers you put in your child's way, there will come a time when they come across something inappropriate on a search engine so it's important to let them know they can come to you if they find something that upsets them online and not to feel that they will get into trouble for seeing it.

Promote critical thinking

Children place a lot of faith in 'facts' they've found online and often aren't savvy enough to question the sources of information. Explain to children that not everything they read online is true and guide them towards reputable sources of information. For instance, reinforce that they should seek your advice for issues such as medical problems and be wary of what they read online.

Our Expert Barry Collins



Barry Collins has been a technology journalist and editor for more than 20 years, working for titles such as The Sunday Times, Which?, PC Pro and Computeractive. He's appeared regularly as a technology pundit on television and radio, including on BBC Newsnight, Radio 5 Live and the ITV News at Ten. He has two children and has written regularly about internet safety issues over the years.

