

‘Kids can bypass anything if they’re clever enough!’ How tech experts keep their children safe online

Amy Fleming, Sun 16 March 2025, *The Guardian* (abridged)

I know I’m not alone as a parent when I admit I have often felt like an exasperated failure in trying to restrict what my children see online. There were the times they hacked their devices’ screen time settings, or managed to stumble into inappropriate content in spite of the controls, not to mention the ever inventive workarounds to access restricted sites. Worst of all is the ill will the rigmarole creates between us all. So when in the first minute of my conversation with digital parenting coach Elizabeth Milovidov, she says, “I think parents need to just kind of give themselves a hug, breathe and start over,” I feel so heard and comforted I could cry.

“Parents are incredibly busy. They’re overwhelmed,” says Milovidov. “And then this whole idea of trying to lock things down is not easy. And yet she herself, a parent of teens, seems so chill. She admits having watched far too much TV in the 70s, and she has turned out OK; she has a PhD and is an international consultant on tech and parenting.

What emerges from speaking with Milovidov and other experts in this field is that what is often needed is not so much a nuts-and-bolts guide to the ever-updating technical side of parental controls as a pep talk on mindset, communication and what’s realistically possible. (...)

“What I always tell parents is that it doesn’t matter so much about the parental controls, as long as you’re talking to them, because even if you lock down that smartphone, that iPad, that gaming console, they are going to hear about inappropriate content. You’ve got to give them some strategies beforehand about what to do if somebody tries to show them something that they know is not appropriate.”

There’s a sense, she says, that if your child does see something inappropriate, you’ve failed. “I would just tell parents to believe in themselves a bit more. It’s inevitable that they’re going to see something at some point.” (...)

Ekaterina Hertog, associate professor of AI and society at the University of Oxford, has found in her research interviews with young people that “monitoring is often very top-down. And sometimes that approach can be harmful, because it can be perceived by young people as: ‘My parents don’t trust me – I haven’t been doing anything wrong, and I explain it to them, but they don’t listen.’” This, she says, can create additional risks, “where young people try to go around those restrictions. When they get into trouble, they might be really reluctant to go to parents and tell them, ‘I went on that website and saw this really disturbing video,’ because they were not allowed.”

“We’re creating a lot of fear,” says Milovidov. “Yes, there are risks online, but we cannot live in fear. Social media, games, messaging apps, AI, connected homes – they all come with their own set of risks. Whether it’s privacy, cyberbullying, misinformation, whatever, there are ways to limit the risk. But bans don’t always work.” (...)