Parents, don't panic. You can help your child stay safe online

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If the increase in blackmail by webcam worries you, protect your child by taking an informed interest in their online life

'A major reason why children don't disclose online problems is fear that they'll have the technology taken away from them, thereby taking away a large part of their social lives.' Photograph: Garry Wade /Getty

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The increase in online sexual offending involving blackmail on webcam was revealed on Friday by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (Ceop) centre. News of this worrying trend follows a summer of stories on cyberbullying, trolling and child abuse imagery. For some parents, this may be interpreted as another sign that the internet is a place where their children shouldn't play, explore and chat.

It is true that children are being drawn into a cycle of abuse by callous individuals and we must help them break free – by letting them know that help is out there and it's never too late to speak out. For young people we talk to, their overwhelming experience of the internet is positive.

Alongside the risks, we must recognise the tremendous opportunities that the internet brings for young people. For parents, this means a level-headed and informed approach to what their children do online. Don't panic. A major reason why children don't disclose online problems is fear that they'll have the technology taken away from them, thereby taking away a large part of their social lives.

The best way to help prevent your child experiencing problems on the internet is by taking an active and informed interest in their lives – online and in the real world. Have a conversation with your child about their life online. Then, have another. Find out what they love about the internet, keep up an active interest and if problems arise, you'll be the one they turn to.

As well as talking about the positives, it remains crucial to directly address the risks of webcam abuse. If you've got a teenager, talk to them about online blackmail.

Three ways to open a conversation:

1. I know some young people talk about sex and even share sexual images online – what do you think about this?

2. Has anything ever happened to a friend online that's worried you?

3. What are the things that you do to keep yourself safe online?

Three things to say in the conversation:

1. Never share an image or do anything on a webcam you wouldn't be happy for family or friends to see.

2. If someone threatens you online tell someone you trust. You can talk to me about it and I'll understand.

3. If you do get into problems online, it's never too late to get help. We will understand. You won't be blamed.

Three things to do if your child tells you they've been blackmailed:

1. Believe your child and tell them you believe them. Their experience needs to be acknowledged and understood.

2. Don't blame them, and tell them you don't blame them. Even if they've engaged in risky behaviour – risk-taking is a normal part of adolescent development

3. Don't immediately ban them from the internet. Although you may need to take short-term safety steps, the best way for children to stay safe is by learning how to negotiate the online world.

Remember if your child has been hurt online, you'll also be affected. Find someone outside the situation to talk about how you're feeling.

• If your child does disclose they're being abused online or you're worried they might be, you can report it to Ceop at ceop.police.uk