

Virtual private networks (VPNs)

What is a VPN?

A VPN is an app or program that lets someone connect to the internet through a special private connection, sometimes known as a 'tunnel'. It hides their location and can make them harder to identify online. This usually makes their online activity more private.

VPNs are often used by businesses but can also be used for things like getting around geographical limits (like watching streaming services' content in another country).

Since the Online Safety Act 2023 introduced age restrictions on adult content, social media sites and other sites/apps that might cause harm, there's been an increase in downloads for VPN apps and programs. VPNs can help someone bypass these restrictions and blockers.

You can get VPNs in the form of:

- Downloadable apps from the Apple App store and Android Google Play store
- Plugins/extensions for web browsers (e.g. Google Chrome, Microsoft Edge)
- Desktop apps/programs on your computer

This means your child could use VPNs on their computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone.

Many VPN services require a one-off or monthly payment, but there are a lot of free VPNs, too – see below for the risks around using a free VPN.

What are the risks?

Your child might use a VPN to access adult and/or harmful content by bypassing the age gates. They can use the VPN to change their location to another country with no or fewer restrictions and access content that might be harmful to them, like pornography or social media sites.

Some VPNs (especially free VPNs) might also collect information about your child's browsing history and sell the data. These VPNs might:

- Track your child's browsing history
- Sell your child's data
- Contain malicious software that could reveal their device and personal information to someone who shouldn't have it

How to spot if your child is using a VPN

This isn't always easy to do, but you can:

- Keep an eye on your child's download history on their computer, phone or tablet. Look out for any apps or programs you don't recognise, and look them up to see what they are. See below for instructions on how to do this:
 - Google Chrome (computer/laptop) – type 'chrome://downloads' into your address bar

- [Microsoft Edge](#) (computer/laptop)
- [Mozilla Firefox](#) (computer/laptop)
- Safari (computer/laptop) – open ‘Finder’, select ‘Go’ and then ‘Downloads’
- [Apple app store](#) (iPhone/iPad)
- [Google Play Store](#) (Android smartphone/tablet)

➤ Look out for secretive behaviour, especially if your child is hiding their device’s screen from you or keeping the entire device hidden from you

➤ Where possible, look at the adverts that pop up on your child’s device. If they’re using a VPN to pretend to be in another country, adverts might show foreign currencies or languages

➤ Pay attention to their phone’s display, especially for key or shield icons in the top corners (usually next to the Wi-Fi, mobile data, or battery symbols) – this can indicate that a VPN is active

What can we do at home?

We’ll talk to pupils about harmful material online in school, but this is more effective if you speak to them about it at home, too:

➤ Have an open, zero-judgement conversation with your child about what they do online

➤ If they are using a VPN, explain to your child why certain content is restricted and the dangers of using a VPN to access it (see ‘What are the risks?’ above)

➤ Set clear rules with your child about the apps they can use and the sites they can go on

➤ If you’re planning on giving your child a smartphone, tablet or laptop, consider setting up parental controls so you can monitor and limit their activity. See how to do this on:

- [Apple](#) (iPhone/iPad)
- [Android](#) (restricts downloads on Google Play)
- [Windows](#) (computer/laptop)
- [Mac](#) (computer/laptop)

Sources

- [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#)
- [VPNs top download charts as age verification law kicks in, BBC News](#)
- [Online Safety Act: explainer, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology](#)

This factsheet was produced by [The Key Safeguarding](#): thekeysupport.com/safeguarding