

## Online gateway behaviours and how parents can handle them

### 1. What do gateway behaviours look like online?

Gateway behaviours refer to smaller-scale antisocial acts that can be overlooked in the moment, but these behaviours can lead to more serious issues over time if not addressed early on.

Although it is difficult to pin down specific gateway behaviours online, some examples may include secretive technology use, breaking rules relating to technology, inconsiderate online acts, excessive technology use, or creating memes as a joke or at the expense of others.

Research also suggests that some online behaviours and risks are interlinked, which further highlights the importance of addressing earlier problematic acts. For example:

- Problematic internet use was linked to higher likelihood of cyberbullying perpetration [1] and substance abuse.[2]
- Sexting (i.e. the sharing of sexually suggestive content using technology) may be a gateway behaviour for early sexual activity and other risk behaviours, including cyberbullying. Sexting has also been linked to negative mental health outcomes [3].
- Experiences of cyberbullying have been linked to increased risk of online grooming [4].
- Loot boxes in gaming were linked to problem gambling in a large-scale study [5].

Acknowledging and responding to gateway behaviours that are identified early on is critical in engaging children in conversations about appropriate and responsible technology use.



### 2. Why are gateway behaviours important to address?

When parents fail to notice or they ignore reported or observed smaller-scale antisocial online behaviours of their children, they inadvertently help to normalise them.

Apart from the potential to lead to more serious issues (e.g. cyberbullying or harassment) that impacts their peers or the environments in which they interact in regularly (e.g. their classroom or their teachers), addressing online gateway behaviours is also important for children's social and emotional learning. Research has found that children who demonstrate problematic behaviour displayed lower social competence [6], poorer school performance and more negative teacher and peer relationships over time [7]. This means that these seemingly minor antisocial online acts have potential longer-term effects on children's development, experiences, and quality of their social relationships. Addressing online gateway behaviours is important so that children learn appropriate and effective communication strategies and behaviours.

### 3. What can parents do?

Parents play a significant role in building empathy among children by using teachable moments to call out antisocial behaviour in any form. This can happen by:

- Paying attention to technology use: Notice how your child uses and engages with technology and how this impacts them (or others).
- Considering your child's friendship circle: Start to identify who forms part of your child's friendship group and the online interactions and activities they might be engaging in, discussing or promoting.
- Calling out the negative: Address the smaller issues in the moment rather than further down the track or when things escalate. When doing so, respond from your own perspective of the issue (e.g. "I don't like what you did there", "I thought that was rude") and hold them accountable.
- Emphasising the positive: Recognise and reinforce good online behaviours, habits and practices (it's not just about addressing the bad!).
- Being clear about your values: Communicate your belief systems and values (e.g. empathy, kindness, compassion, respect) and use these to discuss and set up boundaries around appropriate technology use (e.g. technology curfew and rules) and responsible online behaviour (e.g. not resorting to name-calling when frustrated).
- Setting up behavioural expectations: Align your guidelines and rules to your values and communicate these to children directly (e.g. we value kindness and compassion so we won't 'pile on' when others are calling someone hurtful names online). Where possible (e.g. with older children) include them in negotiating these expectations.
- Being a positive example: Model positive behaviours in your own technology use and your reactions and communications online. Also, set good examples for conflict resolution.
- Being an empathic listener: Some online gateway behaviours occur due to stress or frustration, so listening to your child's underlying needs can help in addressing problematic behaviour.
- Letting them experience consequences: Where appropriate, allow children to experience the repercussions of their online choices or actions as a learning opportunity (e.g. a friendship fallout due to their reactions or being blocked from an online platform or group).
- Having open and direct communication about technology use: Work on establishing good communication with your child relating to technology use and talk openly about their online activities and their potential opportunities, risks and effects. These provide discussion and feedback opportunities.

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