

## Critical thinking online: a parent's guide



**We have been working with Vodafone and the Diana Award on a project for schools called Be Strong Online, helping young people to support each other with some of the challenges they face online. This article is about one of the topics we have been talking to young people about – critical thinking.**

Parents and carers are well aware of how important it is to help children learn to think critically offline. We are constantly teaching our children not to believe just anything or trust just anyone. You might have had to break it to your child, for example, that just because their cousin said hanging upside down would make them taller doesn't mean they should try it.

Because the internet gives us access to so much information, it's especially important to help our children to think critically about what they see. It's hard enough for adults to recognise advertising and resist ridiculous rumours online, but it can be even more complicated for young people.

As a parent, you can use your own experience to help your child understand how to think critically online – this article and our top tips will help you to make sure your children are developing the skills they need to navigate the truth, lies and exaggerations they see online.

### **How you can help your child**

As with all things in life, knowledge is power. Familiarising yourself with the issues you need to help your child to understand comes first. Before you tackle the discussion with them, here is our lowdown on the things that can catch your children out.

#### *Advertising*

Have you ever looked at a spread in a magazine, only to realise all the clothes are from the same brand and the feature is actually an advertisement?

Internet advertising can be even more confusing. From sponsored search results to advertorials, in the age of ad blockers (which you can download to stop seeing ads on the websites you visit) brands are getting more creative about pushing their products online.

The law says that paid-for content must be indicated, so often the words 'sponsored by', 'ad' or 'advertising promotion' will be written somewhere (see below). But these aren't always easy to spot.

### [advertorial example.jpg](#)

The screenshot shows the top of a Grazia magazine article. The header includes the 'GRAZIA DAILY' logo, navigation links for Fashion, Hair & Beauty, Diet & Body, News & Real Life, Celebrity, Magazine, Win, and Crazaescapes, and a 'Subscribe to Grazia magazine' button. A yellow banner reads 'SPONSORED CONTENT'. The article title is 'Could you work with your best friend?' by PANDORA, dated 22 Apr 22 10:09:57. It features social media sharing icons and a 'Contribution from We Are Twinse in association with PANDORA' note. The main image shows two women sitting at a desk in an office. Below the image is the sub-headline 'The ESSENCE of friendship' and the start of the article text: 'The question we get asked time and time again is "how do you both handle WAT with your full time jobs?!" and our immediate response is always "we really don't know, we just get on with it!" Although in theory this is somewhat true, we've made a few changes to our work and personal lives and are now in a place where we feel comfortable and confident in managing both our full time jobs and the blog.'

The screenshot shows a social media post from PANDORA. The post includes a video thumbnail with a play button, a text description asking if the user's mother knows their unique qualities, and a link to a Pandora website. Below the video is a tweet from @PANDORA\_UK mentioning a 'Mavish Date' and talking about the 'ESSENCE' of their relationship.

Internet celebrities like vloggers often advertise products and again, it's not always easy to tell. A YouTuber who posts a video showing off her new mascara might be genuinely excited about her make-up, but she might also get paid to promote it. These videos should be labelled as ads if they've been paid for their endorsement, but it's easy to miss these warnings if you're not looking out for them.

#### Clickbait

With so many media outlets online there's a lot of competition for clicks and attention, and it can be tempting to exaggerate to get someone to click on your story.

Some examples of clickbait are laughably obvious – any headline ending in 'you won't believe what happened next,' for example (see our example from BuzzFeed.co.uk below).



## This Might Be The Funniest Thing Kanye West Has Ever Done

ICONIC.

Shared via... 4 hours ago 102 likes

But some are subtle. An eye-catching headline doesn't necessarily mean an unreliable story, but it's important to think about how information is presented and why those choices have been made.

### Rumours

You might have heard this Mark Twain quote before: 'a lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth can get its boots on.'

Did you know there's no evidence that Mark Twain ever actually said these words? There's a lot of truth to this (ironically misattributed) quote, and it's especially relevant online. False rumours aren't an internet-only phenomenon, but social media can help them spread.

You might remember that in April 2013, the hashtag #nowthatchersdead, created to share reactions to Margaret Thatcher's death, was misread by some Twitter users as 'Now That Cher's Dead,' leading some people to start mourning the famous singer.

### [cher example.jpg](#)



Misunderstandings and misinformation can spread quickly online, so it's important to remember that just because something is trending doesn't mean it's true.

### Ready to talk.

You're probably already talking to your child about who they can trust and what to believe. Here's our list of the things you need to cover to help them to develop their critical thinking skills:

- *Advertising and endorsements.* Discuss some of the ways companies advertise their products online with them. These include: social media adverts, promoted search results, paid-for content on websites and mentions from internet celebrities on Twitter or Instagram. You might want to look at some online advertising together. You could do a Google search for 'shoes' and see if you can both spot all the sponsored results, for instance.
- *Bias.* Talk to your children about what bias is and how it can influence what people say and do. We all have biases, even if they're subconscious, so it's important to think critically about what you see, even if the source has a good reputation. You might talk about this by asking your child if they know that lots of major news outlets – *The Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily*

*Mail* and *The Sun*, for example – give political endorsements. Ask your child if knowing which party a paper endorsed would change the way they felt about their news coverage. Explain that it's usually best to look at multiple sources to get a balanced perspective.

- *Know your sources.* Every source has its own bias, but that doesn't mean all sources of information are equally reliable. To get your child thinking about this, ask them if they're allowed to cite Wikipedia as a source on school assignments. They'll probably say no, because even though lots of experts edit the site, everyone is allowed to register and add content so you can't always be sure where the information comes from. They should think about this when it comes to other sources, too. An unverified Twitter account saying a band has broken up could be anyone, but the band's official website has inside information and will fact-check before posting. You can check if a Twitter account is official by looking for the tick next to the name. Irritatingly, not every official account has a tick to show it's been verified, but you can be safe in assuming that an account that has one is the real deal.
- *How information spreads.* Ask your child to think about why they might like or share certain things on social media. Are they more likely to share something really funny, exciting or shocking? If the answer is yes, they're like most other people online. Eye-catching news can spread quickly before anyone bothers to check if it's true – and even if a correction is posted, it might not get the same amount of attention. Rumours gain more credibility once they reach a certain critical mass, but lots of people saying the same thing doesn't always make it so.

You can also remind your child that they can ask you if they're not sure whether something they've seen online is true. If they do come to you, try asking them some questions – like who shared this, how reliable are they, does it seem like an ad – before you give them an answer. By discussing it with you, they'll get a chance to practise their critical thinking skills and hopefully become more confident about evaluating information online.

### Further help

Our Parenting in the Digital Age course offers lots more information about staying safe and thinking critically online. You can find out more and complete the programme [here](#).

At Parent Zone we're trying to find out more about the tech families trust. Who makes it easier for you and your child to navigate the online world? Tell us [here](#).

Find more information about Vodafone's Be Strong Online programme [here](#).