

MESSAGING  
keeping  
your child  
safe on the  
Internet  
WORLD WIDE WEB  
CHAT ROOMS



# tips for parents and carers

**The Internet revolution** has transformed all of our lives, rewriting the rules about how we communicate with each other, how businesses operate and how we conduct our daily lives. The Internet has given young people, in particular, a virtual playground, an international school and a place to meet and make friends. More than any other group, young people have embraced the new technologies and made them their own – at school, at home and with friends.

But, sadly, the Internet – like so many other technological advances – is not immune from criminal abuse, and can bring its own dangers, not least to our children. Behaviour on the Internet is subject to the same rule of law as the real world. And, just as in the real world, we need to take precautions on the Internet to protect ourselves from harm.

The Government's Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet is a positive partnership of experts from the Internet and computing industry, child protection organisations and the police, which is working to make the UK the best and safest place in the world for children to use and enjoy the Internet.

We all need to ensure that taking sensible precautions to protect ourselves and our children online should become as commonplace as it is to lock our doors or not talk to strangers in the offline world.

As parents and carers, you have a crucial role to play. Whatever your Internet experience or expertise, this booklet is not intended to alarm you, but to alert you to the potential dangers that children may face online and help you to help them surf in safety.

Our thanks go to ChildLine, Childnet International, the Internet Service Providers Association and the Internet Watch Foundation and the NSPCC for their help in producing this booklet.

# Keeping your child safe on the Internet

## **Why do I need to worry about safety? I thought the Internet was a wonderful thing?**

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The Internet is a wonderful thing. It's fun, it's a great way for children to keep in touch with friends, and its educational possibilities are almost unlimited. But like any technology, it can be abused.

## **How could that happen?**

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Places called Internet chat rooms allow people to 'meet'. These are areas of the Internet where people have 'conversations' (usually typed, rather than spoken) about common interests such as music, football or television programmes. Everything that is typed can be seen, more or less instantaneously, by everyone else using the chat room on their own computer.

## **That seems harmless enough. What's the problem?**

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Chat rooms can be completely harmless and they can be a lot of fun. They are certainly very popular, and there are hundreds of thousands of them. But you can't tell who anyone is in a chat room. Because of this, and because chat rooms are particularly popular with children and teenagers, there is a small risk that they can be used by paedophiles or sex abusers looking for victims. Adults who want to exploit children might pose as teenagers themselves, try to strike up a friendship and eventually,

try to meet a child or teenager. This is why the first rule of chat rooms is NEVER to reveal any personal details – that includes full name, address, telephone number, email address and mobile number. To find out why, see page 6.

**But how can I get involved in all this? I feel completely overwhelmed by the Internet and my children know much more about it than I do.**

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You can do a great deal. You can certainly be a good parent or carer and teach safety issues even if you don't know exactly how the technology works. Take an interest in what your child does online and if you don't know how to use the Internet, ask your child to show you. Let them know they can come to you if something upsetting does happen. You can also get across the most important safety message about chat rooms. That is, everyone your child meets in chat rooms is a stranger – and remains a stranger even though your child may consider them to be a friend. Surfing the Internet from the comfort and safety of home can give a false sense of security.

**Isn't all this a bit far fetched?**

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The risk is small but it is real and the consequences can be very serious. In October 2000, a 33-year-old man was imprisoned for having sex with a 13-year-old girl he had met in a chat room. He had built up a relationship with her over several months – a

process known as grooming – before they finally met. There have been many other cases, and those who try to contact children online may be abusing children offline as well.

**I still don't understand how it can happen. If chat rooms are public places, available to all, everyone else would see what was going on.**

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Once you are in a chat room, you can be invited to have a one-to-one conversation with someone. This is like stepping out of a party full of people into a private room and having a separate conversation with a stranger. No one else can read what is being written. It could be extremely dangerous. Getting a child on their own, and building up a relationship, is exactly what a paedophile wants. So discourage your child from having one-to-one conversations. They should stay in the public area of the chat room, which is open to all, and where they should be much safer.

online  
friends

**So that's why they shouldn't give out any personal details?**

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Exactly. Tell your child they should never reveal information about their name, address, password or school. Sometimes children think it's OK to give out a mobile phone number or their email address. It isn't. It gives a stranger direct access to your child, and you have no way of knowing who is contacting them. Even something that seems harmless, like who they're playing hockey or football against next week, or where their favourite pizza restaurant is, could be a clue to their identity. Just as they

wouldn't give personal details to a stranger in the street, so it should be with people they meet in chat rooms.

### **What if they become so friendly with someone they chat with online that they want to meet them in person?**

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Then always go along too, and arrange to meet in a public place where there are lots of people around. Children and teenagers should NEVER arrange to meet anyone they have encountered online without a responsible adult being present.

### **What else can I do to keep my child safe?**

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Advise them against opening links to other sites they might be sent in a chat room (they may be pornographic). Similarly, they shouldn't open emails from anyone they don't know (again, they may contain pornographic or upsetting images, or viruses which could harm your computer). This could also be a way for the sender to discover personal details about yourself.

If they are being pestered by someone they don't like in a chat room, there will probably be a facility to block messages from that person (see below).

### **What if something unpleasant happens while they are actually in a chat room?**

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They can leave the chat room. Alternatively, chat rooms usually offer the option to block messages from other users. So if someone repeatedly types things your child doesn't like, they can block them from their computer screen. Some chat rooms also let you report abusive behaviour by clicking on an appropriate link.

### **How do you tell if a chat room is suitable?**

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Chat rooms are given names, such as 'Teenage Romance'. Teenagers should be encouraged to use only those rooms that are appropriate to their age. This is because so-called 'adult' chat rooms are sexually explicit, where people indulge in what is known as 'cybersex'. This can be anything from talking dirty to the exchange of explicit or pornographic material, including the use of images on webcams (see page 18). Although it's not necessarily illegal, it is definitely an area for adults only.

### **How can I encourage my child to use appropriate chat rooms?**

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At the top of your Internet browser, which is the technology that lets you navigate the Internet, there will probably be the word 'Favourites'. This lets you add to a folder web addresses that you often use, or don't want to forget. You could save the address of child-friendly chat rooms here, and agree with your child that he or she will use only these.

### **Wouldn't it be better to avoid using the Internet altogether?**

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Not at all. Despite the potential for problems, it really is an amazing tool for learning and information. Knowing how to use it effectively is increasingly important and necessary. What's more, chatting online, or Instant Messaging (see page 16) can be a way to cut your phone bills, if you have free or low-cost



Internet access in the evenings or at weekends. If you overreact, your child may clam up or simply use the Internet elsewhere. Just drive home the safety messages so your child can feel confident about protecting him or herself.

### **If I see something illegal or suspicious, is there anyone I can report it to?**

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Yes. If you think your child is being contacted by a paedophile, call the police. If you come across material you think is illegal, for example child pornography, contact the Internet Watch Foundation. This is an industry-funded body which seeks to have illegal material removed from the Internet and refers it on to the police. The telephone hotline is 08456 008844 or report it online at [www.iwf.org.uk/hotline/report.htm](http://www.iwf.org.uk/hotline/report.htm)

Alternatively, contact the police Child Pornography Information Line on freephone: 0808 100 0040.

### **Why don't ISPs (Internet Service Providers) do something about chat rooms?**

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ISPs provide the connection to the Internet, just as a telephone company provides access to the phone lines. They can't control what other companies put on the Internet, any more than a telephone company can control what people say on the phone but some ISPs run their own, sometimes more regulated, chat rooms and they and other chat service providers should be happy to explain any safety features which their services have. Don't be afraid to ask.

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What more could I do?

## **What about schools? Don't they teach children about Internet safety?**

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Throughout the UK, pupils are taught how to use email to communicate and how to evaluate different sources of information (including websites). They are also encouraged to appreciate the need for responsible use of these technologies in order to protect information, individuals and society. Schools build key safety messages into these topics, with a view to making sure that pupils understand the safe behaviours to adopt when online.

It is important for you to let your child know that you are aware of these safety messages and to reinforce them at home.

## **What about chat rooms that are supervised?**

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These are called 'moderated' chat rooms and may use a real person or special technology to block personal details, and keep the conversation appropriate.

## **They sound like a good idea.**

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They are a step in the right direction but the technology isn't foolproof and if chat rooms use human supervisors, ask the provider of the chat rooms how they have been recruited and trained. Even if the chat room is moderated, the same safety rules apply.



### **It all makes me feel powerless and worried...**

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It shouldn't. The important thing to remember is that you can help your child be in control. Children like to feel they have tools to cope. If you explain the safety messages, you are giving them something useful and valuable. Though the Internet is a new medium, the safety messages will be familiar. Just as you have taught them about talking to strangers in the real world, so you can teach them here.

### **Are chat rooms the only places where they can make contact with strangers?**

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No. They can also meet people online in places called newsgroups, communities, groups or clubs, and by using Instant Messaging (see pages 16 and 17). But the good news is that the same rules apply: NO personal details; NO meeting up with anyone in person unless they are accompanied by an adult.

### **Are there danger signs I can look for?**

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A child spending an excessive amount of time online could be a worrying sign. Only you as a parent or carer can decide what is excessive, but if it dominates their social activities, you may decide it is too much. Talk of a 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' they have met online may also be a cause for concern.

### **What about pornography?**

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Pornography is very easy to find on the Internet, even by accident. Encourage your child to tell you if they find something online that disturbs them. Reassure them that it is not their fault and that they will not be punished as a result.

# helpline

## **But teenagers are naturally curious about sex. They might go looking for this.**

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They might. Every family is different, and only you know what your teenager is mature enough to see.

## **I don't want them to see any of it.**

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You can buy filtering programmes which aim to exclude access to undesirable material. The Internet Watch Foundation has more information. Ring 08456 008844 or see its website: [www.iwf.org.uk/safe/tool.htm](http://www.iwf.org.uk/safe/tool.htm). This links (ie connects) to a review and a rating of several products by *Which?* Magazine. However, no filtering product is 100% foolproof. Savvy teenagers can by-pass some filters or use the Internet, unfiltered, in a friend's house or a cybercafe. Filters have their place, but they are no substitute for good parental guidance.

## **What about moving the computer?**

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If possible, it's an excellent idea to keep it in a family room.

## **Where else can I get help?**

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Your Internet Service Provider should also be able to provide safety information and tell you what services it provides for children and teenagers.

- **Internet Watch Foundation:** Industry-funded body with hotline to report illegal material. Tel: 08456 008844, [www.iwf.org.uk](http://www.iwf.org.uk)
- **Police Child Pornography Information Line:** Freephone police number to report incidents of child pornography. Tel: 0808 100 0040. This can also be accessed via [www.met.police.uk](http://www.met.police.uk)
- **For Kids By Kids Online:** Independent body based at the Cyberspace research unit at the University of Central Lancashire, [www.fkbko.net](http://www.fkbko.net)
- **Childnet International:** Not-for-profit organisation aiming to make the Internet a great place for children. [www.childnet-int.org](http://www.childnet-int.org) Its related site, [www.chatdanger.com](http://www.chatdanger.com), has specific safety information on chat rooms.
- More information about the schools' Internet Proficiency Certificate for Key Stage 2 pupils (7-11 year olds) is available online at [www.becta.org.uk/news/pressrelease/jul1101internet.html](http://www.becta.org.uk/news/pressrelease/jul1101internet.html)

Children's charities:

- **NCH:** Tel: 020 7704 7000, [www.nch.org.uk/itok](http://www.nch.org.uk/itok)
- **ChildLine:** The UK's free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in trouble or danger. The number for children to call is 0800 1111, [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)
- **NSPCC Child Protection Helpline:** Freephone: 0808 800 5000, email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk), textphone: 0800 560566

Who can help me?

# Jargon explained

## *Address*

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An address is how you find places on the Internet. Typically they begin www (world wide web) then have the name of the company or institution concerned. For example, the education section of the Houses of Parliament is at <http://www.explore.parliament.uk/> The things that look like full stops are pronounced 'dot'.

A website address is different from an email address, which is used to contact an individual. Email addresses contain the @ symbol (pronounced 'at') and the email address for parliament's education unit is [edunit@parliament.uk](mailto:edunit@parliament.uk). A fictional example for an individual might be [joebloggs@parliament.uk](mailto:joebloggs@parliament.uk). If you were to read this out loud, it would sound like: "Joe Bloggs at Parliament dot UK".

## *Attachment*

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An attachment is a file that can be sent with (attached to) an email or other messages on the Internet. It may contain text, pictures, photographs, graphics, sound or video.

## *Browser or web browser*

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A piece of software, ie computer instructions or computer program, which lets you explore (browse) the Internet. The best-known are Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator. One will come pre-installed in your computer.

## *Chat room*

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A place on the Internet where people communicate by typing messages (or by speaking using a microphone and headsets – see page 16). The text is displayed almost instantly on the computer screens of everyone else in the chat room, wherever they are in the world. Someone a teenager meets in a chat room might become one of their 'friends' even though they have never met in the real world.

## *Click*

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Pressing one of the buttons on a computer mouse to execute a command.

For example, you might 'click on' a small picture in order to enlarge it, or on a financial site, click on the word 'Savings'.

### ***Cyberspace and Cybercafes***

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'Cyberspace' is another way of referring to the Internet. Cybercafes (or Internet cafes) contain rows of computers and offer public access to the Internet for a fee. They may or may not serve food and drink.

### ***Download***

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To transfer information from the Internet to your computer. More often than not it will be free. For example, you can 'download' a picture you might want to print out, or 'download' software that allows you to chat. You can even 'download' a piece of music.

### ***Email (Electronic mail)***

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Messages sent electronically (over the Internet) from one computer to another, to an email address.

### ***Favourites***

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An icon on the Internet's browser that allows you to add to a folder web addresses that you use often or don't want to forget. This could be used to save the addresses of approved chat rooms, which you could agree with your child.

### ***Filter***

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A means of blocking certain types of material from your computer. For example, with the right software, you can filter out sites that contain violence, sex, hate or racist material.

### ***Hardware/Software***

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Hardware is the equipment, such as computer monitor (or screen), keyboard and mouse; software is the computer programme or instructions that allows you to use it. For example, word processing software lets you type documents or letters. Some software packages come pre-installed in your computer and are free to use. Other, more advanced, packages can be bought. Still others (eg: those that allow people to chat) can be downloaded, free of charge, over the Internet.

### ***Headsets***

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Many computers are supplied with the facility to transmit sound, with the necessary software and hardware, and headsets and a microphone. These can be used to talk in real time – just like the telephone – to another computer-user anywhere in the world. Potentially a boon, and a way to save money on phone bills, they could expose your child to unwelcome and/or unsuitable conversations when they don't know the other user.

### ***Icon***

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A small picture, often self-explanatory, which performs a function when you click on it. For example, if you click on the icon of a printer, the printer will print the page you are looking at.

### ***Instant Messaging or IM***

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You can Instant Message a friend on the Internet in much the same way as you can send a text (written) message to their mobile phone. Both parties must agree to receive messages from each other to use the service, and it is an easy and useful way of keeping in touch with friends. It works much like a chat room, where you exchange typed messages more or less instantly. But other people can be invited in to take part. Person B might say to person A can person C join in? You don't know who person C is... so there is a theoretical opportunity for abuse.

Unlike chat rooms, Instant Messaging is usually more closely associated with a network of friends. So if strangers are invited in, it could be easy for them to find out things about your child and his or her friends – for example that they meet in McDonalds every Saturday at 7pm, or even where they live. If a stranger is present, the safety rules should apply.

### ***Internet***

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A global network of computers that connects people and information. Also known as the 'net'.

### ***ICQ (I seek you)***

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An Internet programme you download (from [www.icq.com](http://www.icq.com)) that tells you which of your friends are online and lets you contact them. Among other things, the programme lets users chat, send messages and files, exchange web addresses, and play games.

### ***IRC (Internet Relay Chat)***

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Another form of online chat. You need to download a programme to use it. See [www.mirc.com/](http://www.mirc.com/) for more information. As with any kind of chat, the same safety rules apply.

### ***ISP (Internet Service Provider)***

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Though you need a Browser (see page 14) to let you explore the Internet, you need an ISP to connect you to it in the first place. ISPs are commercial companies which have different ways of charging for their services. Some well-known examples are AOL, BT, Demon, Freeserve, and MSN.

### ***Modem***

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A hardware device that lets computers communicate with each other over telephone lines. It may be located outside or inside the computer.

### ***Moderated chat rooms***

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Chat rooms where a person or a piece of technology supervises the chat, screening it for inappropriate material or behaviour.

### ***Mouse***

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A small device which is attached to the computer by a cord. Moving and clicking on the mouse lets you navigate around the computer screen. Laptop or portable computers don't have an external mouse, the functions are incorporated into a ball or a pad on the keyboard instead.

### ***Newsgroups and similar services***

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Discussion groups. Unlike chat rooms, they are not 'live'. Participants post (ie write) messages for others to read, just like a notice board. Newsgroups are devoted to specialist subjects from sport to celebrities. In addition to newsgroups, clubs and communities allow people to exchange information on topics of interest. All of these are potentially open to abuse, eg through people posting illegal material such as child pornography.

### ***Online/Offline***

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Being 'online' is being connected to the Internet. 'Offline' is often used as another term for the real world.

### *Profile*

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Some chat rooms let you complete a personal profile which can be made available to other chat room users. Children and teenagers should never include any information in a profile which could identify them.

### *Spam*

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Like 'junk mail', spam is email you don't want and haven't asked for. It can be sexually explicit, which is another reason your children shouldn't give out their email address when they are online.

### *URL*

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Another term for an Internet address. (It stands for Uniform Resource Locator but no-one ever calls it that.)

### *Web (World Wide Web)*

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The enormous collection of sites that has been put on the Internet by companies, organisations and individuals. Sometimes used to mean the Internet, but strictly speaking, only one area of it. Newsgroups and Internet Relay Chat for instance, are Internet services, not web services. You and your children, however, will be able to access both.

### *Webcams*

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Webcams (short for web cameras) are special video cameras that can be linked to the Internet. Just like ordinary cameras, you point them at something – say a view of a beach – and the image appears, more or less live, on your computer screen. It's a fantastic way of seeing another place or person. But they could be also used illegally, or unpleasantly, to send or receive naked or pornographic pictures of individuals.

### *Whispering and private chat rooms*

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Whispering is a way of sending a private message to an individual in a chat room. This is like having a private conversation with a stranger and in general, as in the real world, it is safer to stay in the public area of the chat room, where there is some safety in numbers. Private chat rooms, which can be set up from within a public chat room, are a bit like a splinter group going off to another room at a party.



**T**

**Talk to your children about what they do online. Keep the dialogue going so they feel they can tell you if anything upsets them.**

**H**

**Help your child understand the possible dangers and how they can keep themselves safe.**

**I**

**Internet use is part of our new world. It's useful, fun and educational. Used safely, it's a force for good.**

**N**

**Negative experiences should be shared. Reassure your child that nasty things online are not their fault, and their Internet privileges will not be taken away.**

**K**

**Keep these safety tips handy, and discuss this booklet with your child.**

**S**

**Smart kids keep their details secret – NO giving out personal details, and NO meeting with online friends without a responsible adult being present.**

**M**

**Make a 'Favourites' folder with your child of agreed sites for him or her to visit.**

**A**

**Ask your ISP about the safety features it offers.**

**R**

**Remember there is lots of valuable safety advice you can give your child without being an Internet expert.**

**T**

**THINK SMART AND BE SAFE**

[www.wiseuptothenet.co.uk](http://www.wiseuptothenet.co.uk)