At The National College, our WakeUpWednesday guides empower and equip parents, carers and educators with the confidence and practical skills to be able to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with children about online safety, mental health and wellbeing, and climate change. Formerly delivered by National Online Safety, these guides now address wider topics and themes. For further guides, hints and tips, please visit nationalcollege.com.

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about

SEARCH ENGINES

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Search engines are an integral part of everyday life – with Google alone processing around 100,000 searches every second. Search engines use algorithms to predict which results will be useful to us, though this can expose children to inappropriate content, misinformation and even scams. This guide explains the risks associated with search engines and offers practical advice to help safeguard young users online.

MANIPULATED SEARCH RESULTS

Although search engines take site reputation into account, trustworthiness isn't the main factor. Instead, they use algorithms that can be gamed via tactics like search engine optimisation (SEO), which is big business. As a result, users may encounter misleading content and low-quality commercial products that appear more credible than they actually are.

ILLEGAL CONTENT CAN SURFACE

Search engines are designed to retrieve content based on keywords – not to judge whether that content is lawful. As a result, even illegal or harmful material can appear in search results. Children might assume that anything found through search engines must be safe, just because they're so widely used. This misunderstanding can lead to accidental exposure to seriously inappropriate content.

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Search engines index billions of web pages – and not all of them are factual or safe. Children might stumble across false information or even deliberate disinformation, especially when searching for trending topics or controversial issues.

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT EXPOSURE

Although parental controls like Google's SafeSearch exist, they aren't foolproof, and search engines may bypass them. Young users may still see inappropriate images or content, especially in image searches, even though they may not be able to click on the results. Some niche search engines lack even basic filtering, posing further risks.

ENGINES BEYOND GOOGLE

Even if Google's SafeSearch is enabled, children may use lesser-known search engines that don't have similar protections. Some of these alternatives are less effective at blocking unsavoury content – sometimes by design – making it easier for children to encounter harmful or explicit material. Parental controls may also struggle to detect and block these sites.

UNRELIABLE AI SUMMARIES

Some search engines now offer AI-generated answers at the top of results. While these can be helpful as webpage summaries, they're not always accurate. There have been instances where AI summaries have presented false or even dangerous information, reinforcing the need for critical thinking.

Advice for Parents & Educators

ACTIVATE PARENTAL CONTROLS

While no parental controls tool is perfect, this software can help reduce the likelihood of inappropriate content appearing in search results. Use tools like Google Family Link to set search restrictions and monitor your child's browsing activity.

IDENTIFY AND AVOID ADVERTS

One of the ways search engines generate revenue is by showing adverts to their users. Sponsored search results are labelled, but they're not always easy to spot and can sometimes be malicious. Show your child how to distinguish between paid ads and organic search results – explain why some ads might be misleading or unsafe.

QUESTION AI-GENERATED CONTENT

While AI content is generated quickly and often appears legitimate, teach children that, just because an AI summary is well presented, it doesn't mean it's accurate. Encourage them to review the sources behind AI summaries and check the information with reputable sites or fact-checkers.

PROMOTE DIGITAL LITERACY

Encourage children to question the motivation behind online content and develop critical thinking, as not all sites can be trusted. Some deliberately misinform users in order to sell products or promote misinformation. Developing a critical mindset is one of the best defences against these tactics.

Meet Our Expert

Alan Martin is an experienced technology journalist who has written for the likes of Wired, TechRadar, Tom's Guide, The Evening Standard, The Guardian and The New Statesman.

#WakeUpWednesday®

The National College®

Users of this guide do so at their own discretion. No liability is entered into. Current as of the date of release: 09.04.2025