

Policy Guide for Online Safeguarding and Digital Media Use in Early Years Settings

This guide has been developed to support Early Years settings consider and implement a whole-setting approach to digital media use and online safeguarding. We encourage leaders to read each section and reflect upon the questions posed, to further improve and develop effective policy and practice in keeping children safe when using digital media. For a more thorough exploration of your setting’s online safeguarding, please use our **Online Safety Audit for Early Years Settings** – onlinesafetyaudit.lgfl.net.

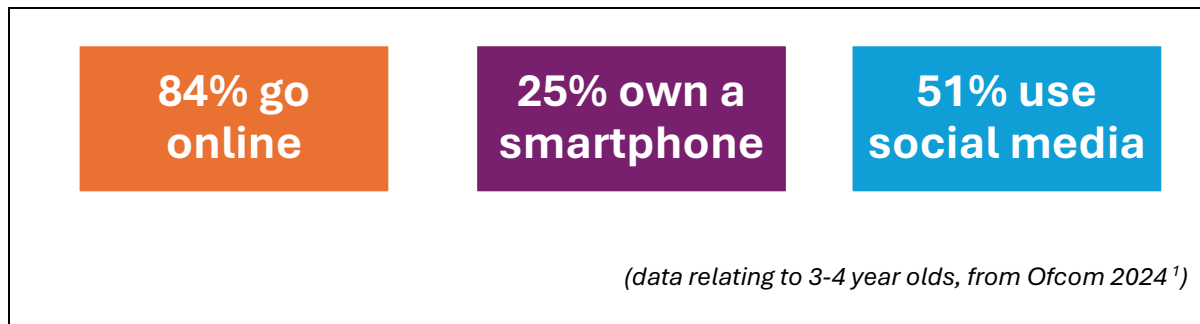
For school-based settings, please see our range of template policies available at safepolicies.lgfl.net that are more appropriate for you.

Technology changes rapidly and so for the purposes of this guide, we are referring to any internet enabled device (e.g. PCs, laptops, tablets, smart boards, smart Televisions and wearable smart devices) as **digital media**. We are also considering the varied and different uses of these technologies by children, including self-led (e.g. children playing a game or navigating an app on a device) and passive consumption (e.g. watching nursery rhymes or videos on a large screen that has been set up by an adult). It is important that when thinking about digital media, we consider the rich variety of experiences that this encompasses, and that we do not reduce this concept into too narrow a view (e.g. only thinking about smartphones or ‘screens’ - some digital media doesn’t have a screen).

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1. Why a whole-setting approach to digital media use?



Digital media use in the early years has become ubiquitous. In early 2024, Ofcom reported the following relating to 3-4 year-olds: **84% go online** (which includes a diverse range of behaviour such as streaming video content, playing games, using smart devices in the home and making video calls), **25% have their own smartphone** (although tablets are the most used device in this age range) and a staggering **51% are using some form of social media** (despite the minimum age for these being 13 years old). The same report from Ofcom states that **34% of parents of 3–4-year-olds ‘find it hard to control their child’s screen time’²**.

Although research relating specifically to 0–3-year-olds is still emerging, the modern day pervasiveness of technology does not swerve this age group. Most children are now surrounded by a range of technology from birth (smart home assistants, smart appliances such as washing machines and doorbells, internet connected toys, smart TVs, audio devices etc.) and they interact with this technology in a diverse range of ways³. This is often reflected in early years settings too. Digital media offers people of all ages, wide-ranging opportunities, and young children are no different. Children can benefit from digital media in various ways including relationship building with loved ones who are not physically present, learning language/s, skill development, play and relaxation. Digital media is not inherently ‘bad’, and it is important that this is not forgotten when developing a setting’s approach to its use. Digital media can support children with all areas of early learning.

However, there are also a number of concerns relating to young children’s use of digital media. For example, how excessive and passive use of devices in the early years, is impacting on children’s ability to emotionally regulate, to hold attention and on their speech and language development⁴.

¹ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2024>

² <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2024>

³ <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/faculties/health-and-education/research/projects/tech-and-talk>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8078852/>; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5823000/>, Why the Online Safety Bill must include risks to

Anecdotally, the use of digital media in some instances has been seen to **replace human reciprocal interaction, play, physical movement** and other experiences that we know are critical for healthy child development. It is not unusual to see young children passively watching short reel video clips instead of playing or talking to others. Phone and tablet holders can be bought for buggies and cots to hold children’s attention or assist them to sleep. And some children are given a device when they are experiencing ‘big emotions’, as a form of distraction, instead of children developing critical social and emotional skills to regulate and manage these emotions⁵.

The work of Professor Tim Smith and Dr Rachael Bedford says that “*0-5-year-old children’s development of **concentration, self-regulation behaviours and sleep may be negatively associated with unconstrained screen time***”⁶.

Another consideration for practitioners is the impact of their own use of technology on children. Firstly, children learn from and are influenced by observing those around them, and so it is important that staff demonstrate positive technology use and habits. Secondly, technology can sometimes interfere with the relationships between an adult and a child (known as ‘technoference’). This includes adults checking devices during interactions, creating a feeling of intrusion or of children feeling ignored⁷.

In addition, the Internet Watch Foundation reported⁸ that in 2023 they found over 2,400 ‘**self-generated**’ **sexual abuse images of 3-6-year-olds**. Within this data there has been an increase in the severity of the imagery, meaning when some very young children are using camera-enabled devices, sexualised images/videos are being taken without a perpetrator being physically present, and then uploaded on the internet.

The following image provides an overview of some of the perceived concerns about digital media use in the early years.

[youngest children | Nursery World](https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/all-about-screen-time); <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/all-about-screen-time>; Lillard and Peterson 2011; Kostyrka Allchorne, Cooper and Simpson 2017

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8078852/>

⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125529/pdf/>

⁷

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8932188/#:~:text=Parental%20technoference%20can%20interfere%20with,problems%20%5B24%2C%2032%5D>.

⁸ <https://www.iwf.org.uk/annual-report-2023/>

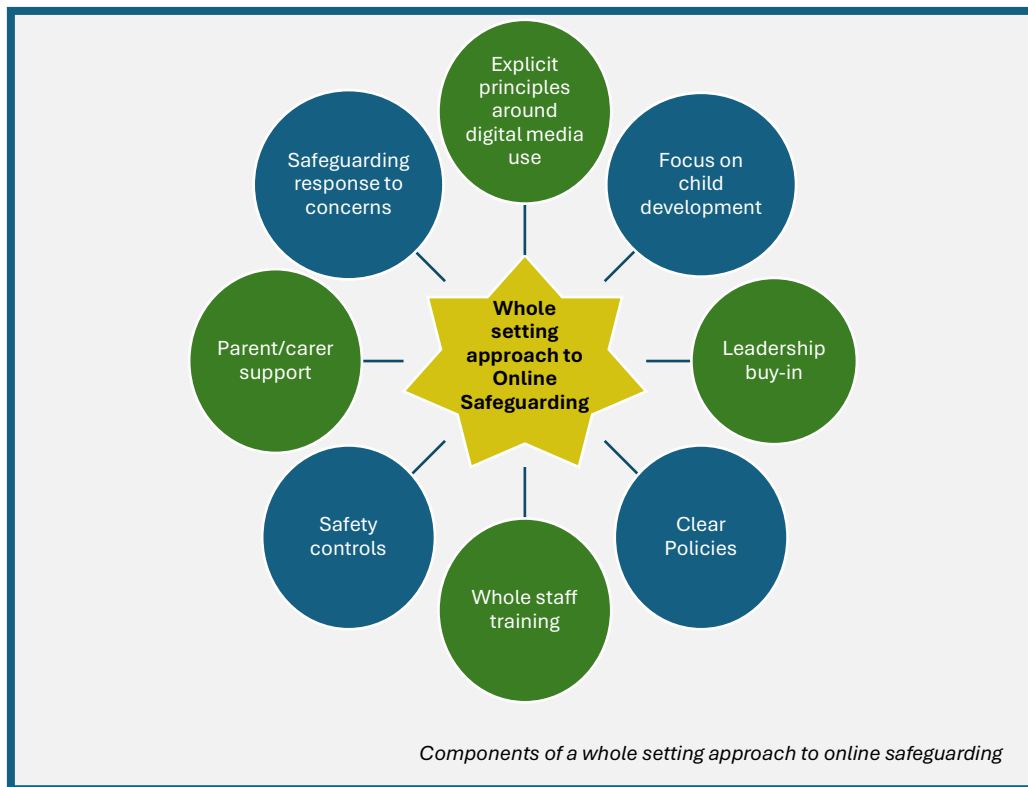


Although we acknowledge that more research is needed in this complex area, we believe the existing research base should encourage settings to take steps to ensure children have safe access to digital media. The next sections of this guide outline some of the key components of a whole setting approach to keeping children safe and well online.

INITIAL REFLECTIONS:

- a) What are the trends in your setting? i.e. have there been any concerns about children's use of digital media and online safeguarding?
- b) If there have not been any concerns about online safeguarding, how have you assured yourself that this reflects reality, rather than indicating a lack in reporting, for example?
- c) How do you record online safeguarding concerns? Are these recorded and managed in the same way as concerns relating to 'offline' concerns?
- d) How often are children using digital media in your setting - and at home? Does this support or contradict your desired approach? Remember to think about ALL technology use, including that which is passive (e.g. where children are watching screens to consume stories/songs/videos).
- e) How do you stay up to date with local and national trends, data and information about online safeguarding and digital media use?

2. Creating a whole setting approach



Adopting safe and effective use of digital media requires a whole setting approach. We believe the ingredients for this include those outlined in the diagram above.

Settings should adopt a **pedagogical and child development led approach** to using digital media. This means, a clear rationale for **when** children start using technology in the setting, **why** it is being used and **how** it supports their development. Use of digital media in settings can happen without much conscious consideration, leading to its passive use, where there is little to no benefit to children (e.g. watching short reel videos when the weather restricts children from going outdoors, or as a go-to activity before home time), or even worse, where it is sometimes harmful. Digital media use should be driven by pedagogy, and it should never replace the factors that we know are so imperative for early childhood development, such as physical movement and human interaction.

Some organisations such as the World Health Organisation ⁹ suggests that **screens should not be used at all below the age of 2 years, and for a maximum of 1hr per day between 2-5 years**. Although, we believe it is important to focus on what a child is doing online rather than simply counting minutes, because not all screen time is equal.

⁹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-04-2019-to-grow-up-healthy-children-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more>

When a setting decides to start using digital media, it is for skilled early years professionals to establish and **choose digital media that can aid children’s development**. And just as important, **for adults to intentionally work alongside children to support and scaffold their learning and experiences**. This ‘**Developmental**’¹⁰ way of using digital media in school settings is described by Dr. Fiona Aubrey-Smith¹¹ as “real-life problem solving and metacognition, evaluating a previous activity and demonstrating explicit evidence of improving it based on feedback or self-review, connecting with another person where discussion explicitly changes the learner’s thinking, ideas and understanding”. It is interesting to consider the possible application of this in early years settings.

The benefits for children using digital media are nearly always related to how the adults around them are supporting them. Take for example the following positive examples:

1. A group of 3-year-olds who are learning yoga for their physical and emotional development. The early years professional is using an online video to support with the session, and is engaging with the children, supporting them with poses, reinforcing key points and ensuring all children are included through adaptations where necessary.
2. Children are learning about the life cycle of a butterfly. They are creating their own alternative stories for what the caterpillar ate in ‘The Hungry Caterpillar’ story. They then use mixed mediums including a drawing app on a tablet, to draw a picture of their ideas, using support from the practitioners to help with the formation of these.

Digital media can support with learning in all 7 areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage, especially **when an adult is helping a child alongside the use of media**.

Some good examples of content and apps that could be used in this way are as follows (but this is by no means an exhaustive list):

Busy Things - busythings.co.uk/ <i>(paid for service or free with LGfL subscription)</i>	CBeebies - bbc.co.uk/cbeebies	Teach your monster - teachyourmonster.org/
Code Monkey - codemonkey.com/hour-of-code/codemonkey-jr/	Borrowbox - borrowbox.com/	Cosmic Kids Yoga - cosmickids.com/watch/
Khan Academy Kids - khanacademy.org/	Phonics Bloom - phonicsbloom.com/	ICT games - ictgames.com/
Creating interactive stories - helicopterstories.co.uk/	Stop Motion Studio - cateater.com/	

¹⁰ <https://sites.google.com/lgfl.net/edtech-hubs/home/stage-1-persuasion/p1-managing-screentime>

¹¹ Aubrey-Smith, F., & Twining, P., (2024)

We know that as children grow, their digital skills will become an increasingly important part of their life, but this does not need to be rushed. When the decision is made for children to start using technology, settings must decide how best to foster these skills. The adoption of an age appropriate ‘**curriculum**’, which supports children to become digitally literate can be helpful for this. An example of this is Common Sense Media’s Digital Literacy materials for the early years ¹².

CONSIDER:

- a) When do you currently allow children to start using digital media in your setting? What is this decision based upon? Do all stakeholders know and understand this?
- b) When children do use digital media, what purpose does this serve? How does it link to their development? Is the decision to use digital media always or predominantly based on your pedagogy?
- c) How much do children use digital media in your setting (remember to think about ALL internet enabled devices and usage)? Have you checked this view is the case in practice?
- d) If different to that outlined above, what is your desired approach to how, what and when digital media is used in your setting? Is your desired approach written down, understood and enacted by all staff?
- e) Have you shared your approach to digital media use and the rationale for this with parents/carers?

¹² <https://www.commonsense.org/education/uk/digital-citizenship>

3. Policies

To create a whole-setting approach around the safe and effective use of digital media, robust **policies** can help to create a positive and consistent culture. These don't necessarily need to be standalone documents, but the setting should provide:

- An overview about the approaches to using digital media and supporting children with digital literacy.
- Online safeguarding principles and requirements for staff practice including reporting procedures
- An outline of the safe systems and technology adopted in the setting
- Acceptable Use Policies for staff around their own use of digital media.

Look at our free to download template policies for schools ¹³ which may assist you with developing your own policies.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS:

- a) Do you have the points above within your policies outlined? Are they up to date?
- b) How do you involve parents/carers in developing these?
- c) Can the policies always be followed? Are there any examples of a mismatch where practice does not or cannot align with policy? For example, the policy states that YouTube is never used with children, but there is a particular session delivered which requires use of a YouTube channel. Or where staff are asked not to use personal devices whilst at work, but provisions have not been made for staff to access work phones when out on a trip. Have you asked staff about whether they have identified any mismatches?
- d) What is the impact of your policies? How do you know they are effective at keeping all children safe online in your setting?

¹³ <https://safepolicies.lgfl.net>

4. Staff training

Safeguarding is a fundamental responsibility of early years settings, and this is why there is a commitment to undertaking safeguarding training regularly. With young children frequently using digital media (whether at home and/or in settings), along with their inherent vulnerability and being exposed to various harms as outlined earlier, safeguarding training must include considerations for how to prevent harm to children and promote their wellbeing when online. All staff should receive good quality training that covers online safeguarding including:

- The landscape of digital media use in the early years
- The risks and benefits of children using digital media
- Raising staff confidence and debunking myths associated with children using technology
- How settings can protect children and prevent online harm.
- Sources of support and advice for staff (e.g. Professionals Online Safety Helpline¹⁴ and LGfL's bank of resources¹⁵)

The safeguarding lead in each setting should have the necessary skills to lead their provision's approach around online safeguarding, whilst working in collaboration with other stakeholders.

STAFF TRAINING CONSIDERATIONS:

- a) To what extent does your setting's safeguarding training cover online safeguarding?
- b) Does your training take a balanced approach and cover both the benefits and the risks of young children using technology (as outlined in section 1) and does it equip staff with the confidence, knowledge and skills to effectively support children as per your policies?
- c) Has your safeguarding lead accessed specific online safeguarding training to stay up to date with this area of practice? How has this been cascaded to other colleagues? How does this impact on policy reviews?

¹⁴ <https://swgfl.org.uk/helplines/professionals-online-safety-helpline/>

¹⁵ <https://saferesources.lgfl.net>

5. Safe controls and tech use

Many settings are regularly using digital media with children. Where this is the case, safety controls should be in place to protect children from inappropriate and harmful content and contact. The following are some top tips that settings are encouraged to implement, and which should be reflected in policies:

a) Search engines

- Make sure you are using a search engine that has **safe search** function (e.g. Google or Bing). This helps to block the most extreme content on the most popular search engines.
- **Enforce** safe search – you can do this at a network level, or on an individual device. ¹⁶NB: enforcing means that individuals can't turn it off.
- If children are using a search engine, consider supporting them to use a **child friendly search engine** (e.g. Swiggle ¹⁷).

b) Safety controls

- For smaller settings, ensure you have set up safety controls on your broadband AND on individual devices. These can help to limit particular types of content and implement time restrictions for example. To get support with setting up controls, have a look here ¹⁸.
- For larger settings, controls should be set up at a network level.

c) Video streaming

- Have you reflected on what purpose video streaming serves? How does it fit with children's development and the pedagogy in your setting? How are adults supporting children with their learning?
- Your setting requires a **TV licence** to use BBC iPlayer.
- You should **not** be playing anything from Netflix/Disney/Amazon Prime as this goes against their terms and conditions.

d) YouTube

- There can be a lot of inappropriate content on YouTube, including inappropriate adverts and comments. As a setting have you reflected on what purpose YouTube serves? How does it fit with children's development and the pedagogy in your setting? How are the adults supporting children when using YouTube? How are you reducing passivity?
- If you decide to use YouTube, consider the following:
 - Would **YouTube Kids** ¹⁹ be better than the traditional platform? Although please note some of the risks around accessing short reel video content (as highlighted in section 1) still apply.
 - What **mode** of YouTube do you use (i.e. there is a restricted mode to allow you to restrict the most inappropriate content)? You can set

¹⁶ <https://www.google.com/safesearch>

¹⁷ <https://swiggle.org.uk/>

¹⁸ <https://parentsafe.lgfl.net/#h.kiustevr44ys>

¹⁹ <https://www.youtubekids.com/>

your mode at a network level²⁰ (in larger settings) or via your profile²¹.

- Where possible practitioners should be **logged in** on the device using the **setting's profile** (rather than their individual profile) and ideally using a **playlist** rather than finding individual videos. This will reduce the likelihood of coming across inappropriate content.
- Do you need to always have the screen on if audio is the main focus?
- Prohibit children from **raw scrolling** in the setting. Adults should support children to choose specific content, and this content should be checked before children see it to ensure it is safe.
- Where videos are played, try to use the big screen rather than small individual screens. This will promote interactions and limit risks to eye damage and issues around posture.

e) Filtering

- For larger settings, have you implemented a filtering system to filter out inappropriate websites? School based early years settings should have filtering systems (see <https://lgfl.net> for information about LGfL's available products)
- Take a look here for more information about filtering in schools - <https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/teachers-and-school-staff/appropriate-filtering-and-monitoring>

f) Monitoring

- Are adults always supervising children when using devices? If not, what is your approach to monitoring children's online activity?
- Take a look here for more information about this - <https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/teachers-and-school-staff/appropriate-filtering-and-monitoring>

²⁰ <https://support.google.com/a/answer/6214622?hl=en&fl=1&sjid=8199841245163900349-NA>

²¹ [YouTube Parental Controls - Internet Matters](#)

6. Supporting Parents

Parents are children’s first and most important educators and the EYFS Framework recognises this by requiring settings to work in partnership with them²². So, it stands to reason that if children are regularly accessing the internet and digital media at home, early years settings should think about how best to support **parents** with key messaging and behaviour to keep children safe at home. After all, as stated above **34% of parents of 3-4 year olds ‘find it hard to control their child’s screen time’**²³.

Many parents find themselves confused and overwhelmed by polarised views and sometimes misinformation about all areas of parenting, including online safeguarding and digital media use. Therefore, settings should consider promoting safety controls (as in section 5), make recommendations for suitable sites/apps for young children to use with parents (see section 2), share clear messaging about monitoring and balancing children’s digital diet²⁴ and about being positive role models when parents use their own devices²⁵. Find out from parents what they might need support with. This may include promoting positive behaviour support without use of devices, sleep advice without using devices, setting up safety controls, understanding age ratings for games (PEGI) etc.

We believe that this support needs to start as early as possible and that parents benefit from a ‘drip-drip’ approach whereby online safeguarding messaging is regularly shared with parents in different formats (e.g. newsletters, workshops, posters, flyers etc.).

However, it’s not only about deciding what information to provide to parents. Just as important (if not more so) is the crucial work that goes on in settings to building positive and trusting connections with them. In this modern era of parenting where media is so prolific in all of our lives, not only can parents feel anxious and confused by how best to raise their children, but they are often unfairly blamed for their choices. This is no truer when it comes to choices about accessing digital media, and the blame can come from numerous origins, including professionals. A **relational approach** to working with parents encourages us to remove unhelpful judgements of parents, and instead focus on understanding them and their context, utilising **curiosity, empathy** and **human connection**.²⁶

²²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65aa5e42ed27ca001327b2c7/EYFS_statutory_framework_for_group_and_school_based_providers.pdf

²³ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2024>

²⁴ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/digital/5-a-day/>

²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lde52EtljQ>

²⁶ <https://parentsupport.lgfl.net>

Look at this free [parent website](#)²⁷ for ideas of resources and information to share. Other useful sources of support are:

- Internet Matters – internetmatters.org
- Child Net – childnet.com

PARENTAL SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS:

- a) What information do you currently share with parents about online safeguarding and digital media use? How regularly? What is the impact of this?
- b) Have you asked parents what support they would like about this topic?
- c) Do you make information regularly available in various formats? E.g. on your website, in newsletters, on posters and via face-to-face sessions.
- d) What external support and sources of information do you utilise and signpost to e.g. other organisations such as those mentioned in this guide?
- e) Do you share with parents, your setting’s approach to using digital media and keeping children safe online?

²⁷ <https://parentsafe.lgfl.net>

7. Template: Early Years Digital Media & Online Safeguarding Charter

To show your setting's dedication to keeping children safe online, use this template charter to outline your key principles around digital media use and online safeguarding. Consider how you will involve children, staff and parents in the development of your setting's charter, and how will you communicate this regularly once developed (e.g. poster / on your website / in training / parent pack etc). **Please amend the charter as required and delete this paragraph, or please use the charter on the next page.**

- 1. In our setting, digital media will be used when there is a clear link to supporting child development. Any other use of digital media will be avoided.**
- 2. Staff will be supported to understand about developmental digital media use. Technology use does not replace or interfere with adult or child interactions.**
- 3. Staff will always support children when using digital media, to promote and scaffold learning.**
- 4. Children under the age of 2 years do not use digital media.**
- 5. Our setting has appropriate technical systems in place to keep children safe online, including broadband and device safety controls to limit access to unsuitable content.**
- 6. Our setting has a robust online safeguarding policy which is reviewed annually to include local and national trends, and which highlights the setting's principles and approach to keeping children safe online.**
- 7. Our setting has an explicit approach to limit children's passive consumption of online content.**
- 8. All staff in our setting access regular safeguarding training which includes online safeguarding - learning about the risks of using devices and staff's responsibilities in keep children safe online.**
- 9. Staff in our setting role model positive and balanced use of technology and there are behaviour policies in place to create clear boundaries for staff's use of technology.**
- 10. Our setting has a proactive approach to supporting parents and carers with keeping children safe online when at home.**

Early Years Digital Media & Online Safeguarding Charter

Our setting is committed to **keeping children safe when using digital media**, and we want to make sure that if we use digital media, it is always for the benefit of children's development. Therefore, we support the following principles.

1. In our setting, digital media will be used when there is a clear link to supporting child development. Any other use of digital media will be avoided.
2. Staff will be supported to understand about developmental digital media use. Technology use does not replace or interfere with adult or child interactions.
3. Staff will always support children when using digital media, to promote and scaffold learning.
4. Children under the age of 2 years do not use digital media.
5. Our setting has appropriate technical systems in place to keep children safe online, including broadband and device safety controls to limit access to unsuitable content.
6. Our setting has a robust online safeguarding policy which is reviewed annually to include local and national trends, and which highlights the setting's principles and approach to keeping children safe online.
7. Our setting has an explicit approach to limit children's passive consumption of online content.
8. All staff in our setting access regular safeguarding training which includes online safeguarding - learning about the risks of using devices and staff's responsibilities in keep children safe online.
9. Staff in our setting role model positive and balanced use of technology and there are behaviour policies in place to create clear boundaries for staff's use of technology.
10. Our setting has a proactive approach to supporting parents and carers with keeping children safe online when at home.

