

# The Screen Time Balance:

## Beyond the Magic Number

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The Toy Story 5 trailer explores the growing role technology plays in children's lives. As Bonnie becomes increasingly focused on her tablet, the toys begin to wonder whether technology is taking the place of the adventures, imagination and connections that once brought them together. This provides a natural opportunity for families to discuss screen time, balance and the experiences that technology should never replace. Whilst technology can support learning, creativity and communication, childhood also needs friendship, play, imagination, family time and real-world experiences.

The film encourages us to ask an important question:  
**"What should technology never replace?"**



### Signs to Look Out For & Practical Steps



#### Regular arguments about stopping.

What might it be replacing? Choice and balance.

##### What could help?

Rather than focusing on the argument itself, try to understand what makes the activity difficult to leave. Is your child talking to friends, trying to finish a game, worried about missing out or simply enjoying what they are doing? Understanding the reason can help you agree expectations that feel realistic.

💬 "Can you tell me two things that make it difficult to switch off when you're having fun online?"



#### Struggling to sleep

What might it be replacing? Rest and recovery.

##### What could help?

Think about what screens may be replacing before bedtime. A screen-free hour doesn't have to mean boredom. It could include reading, drawing, Lego, listening to music or an audiobook, having a bath, chatting about the day or preparing for tomorrow.

💬 "If Bonnie spent all day and night on her tablet, what things might she miss out on?"



#### Increasing secrecy about online activity.

What might it be replacing? Trust and communication.

##### What could help?

Children are more likely to talk about mistakes, worries or uncomfortable experiences when they believe they will be listened to rather than immediately punished. Try to keep conversations calm, curious and judgement-free.

💬 "If Woody was worried about something, what would you want him to do? Why is talking about things important?"



#### Difficulty putting devices down.

What might it be replacing? Balance and self-regulation.

##### What could help?

Help children notice how different activities make them feel. Some online activities leave us feeling energised and connected, whilst others can leave us scrolling without really enjoying ourselves. Encourage children to recognise the difference.

💬 "If you heard Bonnie say, 'Just five more minutes!', what would you say to her?"



#### Technology is crowding out other important experiences

What might it be replacing? Play, hobbies, imagination, family time and real-world experiences.

##### What could help?

Look for opportunities to build on your child's interests away from screens. For example, a child who enjoys Minecraft might enjoy Lego or model building, whilst a child who loves creating videos might enjoy photography, drawing storyboards or writing scripts.

💬 "What's something you used to enjoy doing that we haven't done for a while?"

### Beyond the Screen

#### Things too important to be replaced by devices



Friendships, family conversations, physical play, imagination, outdoor experiences, and human connection.

But it can support those experiences....



#### The Family Film Night

This involves a screen but also involves conversation, laughter, connection, and shared experiences.



Technology is a tool.  
People are precious.  
Keep the Human Things Human.

### Understanding the Different Types of Screen Time

#### Not all screen time is equal.

When we hear "screen time", it's easy to focus on the number of hours a child spends on a device. However, a child creating a video, researching a school project, video-calling grandparents and endlessly scrolling short videos are all having very different experiences.

A healthy balance includes opportunities to Create, Learn, Connect and Consume.

Rather than asking:  
"How long have they been on a screen?"  
try asking:

#### "What are they doing on the screen?"

There is no magic number that works for every child. What works for one child may not work for another, even within the same family. Instead, focus on whether technology is supporting a healthy balance of learning, creativity, relationships, play and real-world experiences.

Using technology to build and maintain relationships.

##### Examples:

- Video-calling family
- Messaging friends
- Playing games together online

##### Why it matters:

Technology can help children feel connected, maintain friendships and strengthen relationships when used positively.

#### CONNECT



Using technology to watch, listen or browse content created by others.

##### Examples:

- Watching YouTube
- Streaming programmes
- Scrolling social media

##### Why it matters:

Consuming content isn't automatically negative, but too much passive screen time can leave less room for creativity, learning and real-world experiences.

#### CONSUME



Using technology to make something new.

##### Examples:

- Coding a game
- Creating digital artwork
- Recording videos
- Building in Minecraft

##### Why it matters:

Creative screen time encourages imagination, problem-solving, self-expression and digital skills.

#### CREATE



Using technology to explore, discover and understand new things.

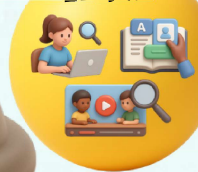
##### Examples:

- Researching topics
- Watching educational videos
- Learning a language
- Completing homework

##### Why it matters:

Technology can support curiosity, learning and independent thinking when used purposefully.

#### LEARN



### Conversation Starters

The trailer introduces the growing role of technology in children's lives and raises questions about balance, play and connection. It reminds us that technology itself isn't always the problem. It's how, why and when we use it that matters most.

"Can you tell me two things that make it difficult to switch off?"  
Use this to explore what makes an activity so engaging for your child.



"If Woody was worried about something, what would you want him to do?"  
Use any of the characters to discuss why talking about online problems is important.



"What should technology never replace in our family?"  
What could our core family values away from the screen be? Can we make a pact or a plan?





# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & DIGITAL LITERACY

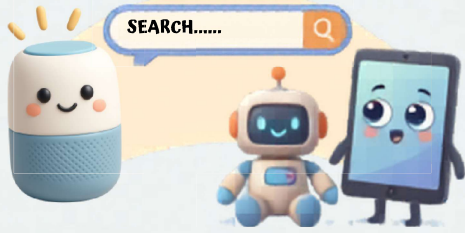
Technology can help solve problems, but it cannot replace human imagination, judgement and creativity.

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## What Parents Need to Know



### AI is already part of childhood

Many parents think of AI as ChatGPT, but children increasingly encounter AI through voice assistants, search engines, homework tools, games, recommendation algorithms and smart toys.

Some newer toys and companion devices are specifically designed to feel conversational and emotionally engaging. Children may see these technologies as friends, helpers or trusted sources of information without fully understanding how they work.

### AI sounds confident, but it doesn't know what is true

Unlike a teacher, parent or trusted adult, AI does not understand information in the way humans do. It has not lived experiences, common sense or the ability to judge whether something is true or false.

Instead, AI works by analysing huge amounts of information and predicting what words are most likely to come next based on patterns it has seen before.

This means AI can sometimes produce answers that sound convincing, knowledgeable and accurate, even when they contain mistakes, missing information or

### AI companions are designed to feel human

Some AI chatbots, smart toys and digital companions are designed to communicate in ways that feel friendly, caring and personal. They may remember previous conversations, use a child's name, offer encouragement and respond in a conversational style.

Like many apps, games and online platforms, these products often use persuasive design techniques to encourage continued engagement. The longer a child spends interacting with them, the more familiar and trusted they can begin to feel.

Over time, children may start to view an AI companion as a friend, confidant or trusted source of advice, even though it does not truly understand emotions, relationships or consequences.

### Using AI Well Is Becoming a Life Skill

Just as children learn how to search the internet safely, they now need to learn how to use AI safely and effectively.

This includes:

- Asking clear and appropriate questions
- Understanding what information should never be shared
- Recognising when answers need checking

### WHY IT MATTERS

Children need support to recognise when they are interacting with technology rather than a person and to understand that AI responses are generated, not genuinely understood.

Children are often taught not to trust strangers online. The challenge with AI is that it doesn't feel like a stranger at all. It feels familiar, friendly and helpful by design. Just because technology sounds caring doesn't mean it cares.

The future won't belong to children who simply use AI. It will belong to those who know when to trust it, when to question it and when to think for themselves.

Children are naturally taught to trust people who sound knowledgeable and confident. AI can sound the same way, even when it is wrong. Helping children understand that AI doesn't always have the right answer encourages healthy questioning, fact-checking and independent thinking. Technology can provide answers, but it cannot replace human judgement.

## Conversation Starters

**Lily Pad Knows Everything?**  
"In the trailer, Lily Pad seems to have an answer for everything. Do you think having all the answers is always a good thing? Why or why not?"

**Who's Advice Would You Trust, Buzz, Woody or Lily Pad? Why?**

**Bonnie's Big Choice**  
"If Lily Pad suggested one thing and Bonnie wanted to do something different, what do you think she should do?"

**What Can Technology Never Replace?**  
"What do you think Woody and Buzz can teach Bonnie that Lily Pad never could?"

**When AI Gets It Wrong**  
"If Lily Pad gave an answer that sounded clever but turned out to be wrong, what could Bonnie do?"

### Technology can support learning, but it should never replace human judgement.

AI is becoming part of children's lives and will likely play an important role in their future. The goal isn't to avoid AI but to help children use it safely, critically and responsibly. By encouraging curiosity, creativity and independent thinking, we can help children benefit from technology without becoming dependent on it.

This resource is inspired by themes explored in Toy Story 5 and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Disney or Pixar.

## Signs to Look Out For & Practical Steps



### Accepting AI answers without question

Using AI-generated answers without checking whether they are accurate.



### Letting AI do all the thinking

Using AI to complete homework, solve problems or create content without adding their own ideas.



### Becoming overly reliant on AI companions

Spending large amounts of time talking to AI characters, chatbots or smart devices for advice, reassurance or companionship.



Ask questions such as: "How do we know that's true?" "Where else could we check that information?"

Encourage children to compare AI responses with trusted websites, books, teachers or adults.



Encourage children to use AI as a starting point, not the finished product.

Ask: "What would you add to make this your own?"



Discuss the difference between real friendships and programmed responses.

Prioritise opportunities for face-to-face conversations, friendships and shared family experiences.



### Understanding the settings

Many AI tools, chatbots and smart devices include safety, privacy and parental controls, but these are not always enabled by default.

Review any AI-enabled apps, devices, toys or assistants used in your home.

Check privacy settings, voice recording permissions, age restrictions and data-sharing settings.



Ask your child to show you any toy, device or app that can 'talk back to them'. Explore the settings together as a family.

## Beyond the Screen

### AI Can Support Learning...

- Explaining concepts
- Generating ideas
- Summarising information
- Translating languages
- Supporting accessibility

### ...But Thinking is Built Through Human Traits



#### Curiosity

Asking questions about the world around us  
Exploring nature



#### Creativity

Drawing, building and making  
Storytelling and imaginative play  
Creating something from our own ideas



#### Problem-Solving

Learning from mistakes  
Tackling challenges independently  
Finding solutions when things don't go to plan



#### Discussion

Listening to different viewpoints  
Debating ideas  
Sharing thoughts with friends, family and teachers



#### Judgement

Deciding whether information is trustworthy  
Considering consequences  
Making informed choices

Digital literacy isn't about teaching children what to think. It's about teaching them how to think when technology gives them an answer.



## WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

### Persuasive Design is Intentional

Persuasive design refers to features built into apps, games and platforms that encourage people to stay engaged for longer.

Common examples include:

- Endless scrolling with no natural stopping point
- Autoplay videos that start automatically
- Notifications designed to pull users back into apps
- Likes, streaks and rewards that create excitement
- Bright colours, movement and fast-paced content that grab attention

These features are not accidents or design mistakes. They are deliberately created to influence behaviour and keep users returning.



### Children's Brains Are Still Developing

Children are not simply lacking self-control.

Their brains are still developing the skills needed to:

- Resist impulses
- Delay rewards
- Recognise when something is influencing them
- Make deliberate decisions about stopping

This means children are often more sensitive to rewards and more likely to repeat behaviours that feel enjoyable or exciting.

### Rewards Don't Need to Be Valuable to Feel Rewarding

Many apps use systems similar to those found in games:

- Points
- Coins
- Daily rewards
- Streaks
- Achievement badges
- Likes and reactions



These trigger feelings of excitement and anticipation.

Children often begin thinking:

"Maybe the next reward is just one more click away."

This can make stopping feel surprisingly difficult, even when they genuinely intended to stop.

### Children Learn More From What We Do Than What We Say

Persuasive design affects adults too.

Many parents have experienced:

- Watching "just one more video"
- Picking up a phone for one thing and forgetting why
- Responding immediately to notifications
- Scrolling for longer than intended

Children notice these habits.

If we want children to recognise when technology is competing for their attention, it helps if they see adults questioning their own habits too.

The goal isn't perfection. It's helping children understand that everyone needs to actively manage technology because many digital products are designed to capture our attention.



## KEY TAKEAWAY

In Toy Story 5, many people become fascinated by LilyPad, often paying more attention to it than the people, toys and experiences around them. The film raises an important question:

### Is technology helping us, or competing for our attention?

Many of the apps, games and platforms children use every day are designed to keep users engaged for as long as possible. Just as LilyPad captures the attention of the people in the film, many digital products use carefully designed features to encourage us to keep watching, scrolling, clicking and playing.



## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

### Turn Off Non-Essential Notifications

Many notifications are not urgent. Their purpose is simply to bring users back into an app.

- Examples include:
  - Likes and reactions
  - Friend suggestions
  - Promotional messages
  - Daily reminders
  - Streak notifications
  - "Someone posted a new video" alerts

For older children, discuss features such as WhatsApp read receipts (blue ticks). Whilst useful, some children feel pressure to respond immediately when others can see that a message has been read.

**Why it helps:** Fewer interruptions mean children are more likely to choose when they use technology rather than responding automatically to prompts.

### Turn Off Autoplay

Autoplay automatically starts the next video or episode before children have a chance to decide whether they want to continue.

On YouTube - Locate the Autoplay toggle - Switch it off

For Netflix

- Go to Account Settings
- Profile Settings
- Playback Settings
- Untick "Autoplay next episode"

**Why it helps:** Turning off autoplay creates a natural pause, giving children an opportunity to stop, think and make a conscious choice about whether to keep watching.

### Review Streaks, Rewards and Daily Reminders

These features can create pressure to return every day, even when children weren't planning to use the app.

- Where possible:
  - Turn off reminder notifications
  - Review reward systems together
  - Talk about whether the app would still be enjoyable without the reward

**Why it helps:** Children learn to use apps because they choose to, not because they feel they might lose a streak or miss a reward.

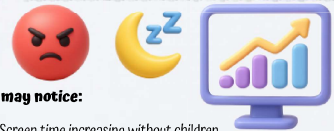
### Check Gaming Notifications

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**Why it helps:** Children learn to use apps because they choose to, not because they feel they might lose a streak or miss a reward.

## SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR



You may notice:

- Screen time increasing without children realising
- Difficulty stopping when asked
- Frustration or arguments when devices are removed
- Mood changes after prolonged use
- Sleep difficulties after device use
- Homework, reading or hobbies feeling "boring" by comparison
- Constant checking for notifications, messages or rewards
- Anxiety about losing streaks or missing rewards

These signs do not automatically indicate a problem, but they may suggest persuasive design features are having an influence.

## PRACTICAL STEPS



### Teach Children to Spot the Tricks

Rather than simply restricting technology, help children recognise persuasive design when they see it.

Ask:

- What is this app trying to make me do?
  - Why does it keep showing me more?
  - Is there a natural stopping point?
  - How does it make me feel when I stop?
- Children who understand persuasive design are often better equipped to manage it.

### Create Natural Stopping Points

Many apps and games are designed without clear endings.

Try:

- Agreeing screen time before they start
- Linking device use to routines
- Giving warnings before transitions
- Encouraging children to choose a stopping point before they begin

### Be a Role Model

Children are more likely to develop healthy habits when they see adults:

- Putting phones away during conversations
- Turning off unnecessary notifications
- Taking breaks from screens
- Choosing when to use technology rather than reacting to it

## This Isn't Just a Parenting Issue

Concerns about persuasive design are increasingly being discussed by charities, researchers, regulators and governments.

Many organisations are calling for technology companies to build products that are safe by design, meaning children's needs and wellbeing are considered from the start rather than relying solely on children to exercise self-control.

This means online safety is not simply about teaching children to make better choices. It is also about ensuring technology companies take responsibility for how their products are designed.



## BEYOND THE SCREEN



Technology can recommend. Technology can encourage. Technology can persuade.

But technology should NEVER replace:

- Our ability to think critically
- Our right to make choices for ourselves
- Our self-control
- Real-world experiences
- Time with family and friends
- Activities that require patience, effort and focus



Technology may compete for our attention, but it should never control it.

The goal is not to remove technology from childhood. The goal is to help children recognise when something is trying to influence them so they remain in control of their own choices.



## CONVERSATION STARTERS

If Bonnie had spent all her time using LilyPad, what things might she have missed out on?

Why do you think some people found it difficult to stop using LilyPad, even when there were other important things happening around them?

How do you think Woody and the other toys felt when people were paying more attention to LilyPad than to them?

Do you think LilyPad was designed to make people want to keep using it? What makes you think that?



# Friendship, Belonging & Making Good Choices

## Peer Pressure, Group Chats & Online Influence



### What Parents Need to Know



#### Online Influence Is More Than Just Social Media

Online influence comes in many forms. It can shape children's thoughts, feelings, choices and behaviours without them always realising it. Many forms of influence are subtle. Children may not realise they are being persuaded because the content feels entertaining, reliable or trustworthy.



#### Children Are Still Learning How Influence Works

Children are naturally curious and are still developing critical thinking and decision-making skills. They are more likely to trust people they admire, follow trends and seek approval from others. Online platforms use algorithms to recommend content based on what children watch, like or engage with. This means that watching one video, creator or trend can quickly lead to more similar content being shown repeatedly. Over time, repeated exposure can make ideas, behaviours or opinions feel normal and widely accepted, even when they don't reflect reality. Just because something appears frequently online does not make it true, healthy or right. This is why conversations about who children follow, admire and see as role models online are so important. Understanding who influences your child can provide valuable insight into the ideas, values and behaviours shaping their digital world.



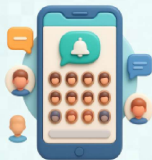
#### Digital Peer Pressure Is Often Stronger Than Face-to-Face Pressure

Peer pressure has always existed, but technology changes how and when it happens. Online pressure can feel more intense because it follows children home, happens 24 hours a day and allows large groups of people to influence decisions at the same time. Features such as group chats, streaks, likes, notifications and read receipts can create pressure to respond, join in or stay connected even when children would rather step away.



#### Group Chats Can Create Unexpected Risks

When a child joins a group chat, other members may be able to see their phone number and profile information, depending on the platform and settings. Children can sometimes be added to group chats or group video calls without knowing everyone involved. This can expose them to unwanted contact, inappropriate content or pressure to participate in conversations they feel uncomfortable with.



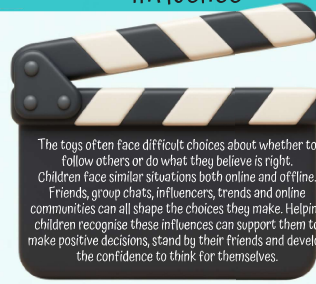
#### Knowing the Rules and Following Them Are Not the Same Thing



One of the most important things for parents to understand is that children can know an online safety rule and still choose not to follow it. For children, the immediate social reward can sometimes feel more important than a potential future consequence. Children may also struggle to fully understand the reality or impact of those consequences in the moment. Understanding the reason behind a child's decision is often more valuable than focusing solely on the decision itself.

#### Curiosity Is One of a Parent's Most Powerful Tools

Children's online experiences change rapidly. Parents do not need to become experts in every platform, but they do need to stay curious. Regular conversations, asking children to explain the apps they use and keeping up to date with common trends can help parents better understand the influences shaping their child's online world. The goal is not to know everything. The goal is to remain involved, interested and approachable.



The toys often face difficult choices about whether to follow others or do what they believe is right. Children face similar situations both online and offline. Friends, group chats, influencers, trends and online communities can all shape the choices they make. Helping children recognise these influences can support them to make positive decisions, stand by their friends and develop the confidence to think for themselves.



### Why It Matters



One of the most important skills children can develop is the ability to make good choices, even when those choices are difficult. Children rarely make online decisions in isolation. Friends, trends, influencers, algorithms and a desire to belong can all shape the choices they make. This means that even children who know the "right" thing to do can sometimes make decisions that don't align with their values. By helping children understand how influence works, we can help them move beyond simply knowing what the right choice is and develop the confidence to make it, even when others think, act or choose differently.



### What Parents Can Do



#### Focus on the Decision Not just the Behaviour

When children make poor choices online, it is tempting to focus on whether their actions were right or wrong. Instead, help them reflect on the decision-making process.

Discuss:

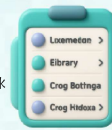
- What choices were available?
- What influenced those choices?
- What might have happened if they had chosen differently?
- Which choice best reflected their values?

The Toy Story characters often face situations where doing the right thing isn't always the easiest option. Helping children reflect on their choices develops critical thinking and confidence for future situations.

#### Review Who Can Add Your Child to Group Chats

Ask your child to show you how group chats work on the apps they use and check:

- Who can add them to groups
- Whether they need approval before being added
- Whether their phone number is visible to other members
- Who can see their profile picture and status



#### Ask Your Child to Show You One Group Chat They Use Regularly

Rather than reading messages, focus on understanding the group itself.

Ask:

- How many people are in the group?
- Do you know everyone in it?
- Would you feel comfortable leaving if the conversation became upsetting or inappropriate?
- Do you know who can add new members to the group?

This helps parents understand who children are communicating with online whilst encouraging conversations about peer pressure, belonging and making positive choices.



#### Help Children Pause Before They Act

Encourage children to ask themselves:

- Am I doing this because I want to?
- Or because everyone else is?
- Would I make the same choice if my friends weren't watching?
- Does this fit with my values?

Learning to pause and think is one of the most powerful ways children can resist unhealthy pressure and make decisions they feel proud of.



### Conversation Starters

Can you think of a time a character had to make a difficult choice? What made that choice difficult?

What do you think is harder: knowing the right thing to do or actually doing it?

Have you ever stood by a friend when others didn't? What made you choose to do that?

Have you ever changed your mind about something because of a friend, a YouTuber, a gamer or somebody you follow online? What made their opinion important to you?

Technology, trends and other people will always influence our choices.

But technology can never replace courage, kindness or the ability to choose what is right. By helping children understand influence, we can support them to think for themselves, stand by their friends and make choices that reflect who they want to be.

# FRIENDSHIP BEYOND THE PLAYGROUND

Why Children's Friendships Don't Stop at the School Gate

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## What Parents Need to Know



### Friendships are now 24/7

Children's social lives continue past school hours through gaming, group texts, messaging apps, and video calls. The goal isn't to avoid these spaces, but to help children navigate them safely and positively. Understanding where children communicate, who they are talking to and how to stay safe can help parents support positive online relationships.



### Digital issues are real-world issues.

For children, being excluded from a group chat, falling out with a friend online or feeling pressure to respond can feel just as significant as experiences that happen face-to-face.



### Technology can help friendships thrive

Technology can help friendships thrive but it can also make friendship challenges harder to switch off from. Children can stay connected with friends wherever they are but disagreements, misunderstandings and exclusion can follow them beyond the school gates.



### You don't need to be an expert on every platform.

Instead, focus on understanding where children communicate, discuss healthy online behaviour and explore privacy settings together. Many apps and games include settings that can help families agree who children can contact and who can contact them, helping to create safer and more positive digital friendships.

## Beyond The Screen

Technology can support relationships, but it should never replace them.

### Technology Can Support Friendships...



Group chats



Gaming together



Video calls

Messaging



### ...But Friendship Is Built Through



Kindness



Trust

Empathy

Shared experiences



## Signs to Look Out For & Practical Steps



### Feeling left out of the group.

Repeated worries about group chats, online games or activities they were not included in.

- Validate their feelings and encourage face-to-face opportunities to strengthen friendships.
- Review the messaging or gaming apps your child uses and check who can contact them, add them to groups or send them friend requests.



### Feeling pressure to always be available.

Worrying about missing messages, notifications or online activities.

- Reassure children that healthy friendships can cope with delayed replies and time away from devices.
- Consider turning off non-essential notifications and agreeing screen-free times so children don't feel pressure to respond immediately.



### Technology can support friendships, but it should never replace them.

Digital friendships are now a normal part of childhood. Like Woody, Buzz and their friends, children have a natural need to feel valued, included and a sense of belonging.



### Friendship problems following children home.

Arguments or disagreements that continue through messages, games or online conversations.

- Focus on understanding what happened rather than immediately deciding who is right or wrong.
- Agree as a family that friendship problems should not be dealt with through long message exchanges and are often best discussed face-to-face or with support from a trusted adult.



### Changes in mood after device use.

Appearing upset, anxious or withdrawn after messaging, gaming or social media use.

- Stay calm and curious. Ask open questions and create opportunities for regular conversations.
- Remind your child that they can come to you if something online upsets them and that your first response will be to listen rather than immediately take devices away.

## Conversation Starters



### Woody and Buzz's Digital Dilemma.

"If Woody and Buzz had an argument in a group chat, what do you think would help them solve it?" This can help with communication and repairing friendships.



### Inclusion with Bonnie:

Imagine Bonnie notices a child being left out while others are playing a game. What do you think she could do to help? This scenario helps kids learn about empathy and the sometimes challenging but important task of standing up for their friends.

### Defining a Good Friend.

"What makes someone a really good friend, both online and offline?" This focuses on kindness, trust, honesty, and respect.



### Digital vs. Physical Kindness.

"Do you think it's easier or harder to be kind through a screen? Why?" What about being mean, is it easier or harder online or offline? This helps children reflect on both their online identity mirroring their offline identity as well as their own online behaviours. It also helps build empathy.

