



Unsolicited contact from strangers

Unsolicited contact from strangers involves being contacted on the internet by people that are unknown.

This contact may or may not be malicious in intent. For example, it could be contact from a stranger who may be looking for a relationship or from someone who wants to exploit an individual in some way. The contact could be via social media services or direct messaging services, including email.

The person making the contact may be adult or child, and they may use information available about the child in their own social media to imply familiarity. The unsolicited contact may be one way – the individual may be sending content / messages to the child without them replying – or the child may have responded.

This guide is for stranger contact with no sexual connotation; for unsolicited contact with a sexual connotation, see the Grooming guide.

WHEN A CHILD MAKES CONTACT DIRECTLY

A child who has received unsolicited contact may feel threatened, confused or distressed. Commend the child for making contact and acknowledge their courage for speaking up about their concerns and feelings. Reassuring the young person that they have made the right decision and that you are there to listen and help them is vital. Equally important is making sure that you tell them that it is not their fault and they are not to blame in any way.

Be clear where your helpline stands on confidentiality so the child knows what may happen with information they share. For example, explain that anything they tell you will be private unless they tell you something that makes you think they are in danger and you are able to get them help, in which case you would talk to them about what you are going to do.

Build a relationship and give the child the time and space to open up further and volunteer more information. Remember to acknowledge the emotional impact of what has happened, and take care not to make assumptions about the situation.

Be supportive. As well as gathering information about the nature of the contact, try to understand how the child has been affected emotionally, so that you can support them in that and even escalate or safeguard if necessary. Questions should be clear and open-ended, for example:

- Has the person asked you to say or do anything that makes you feel unsafe or worried?

- How long have they been contacting you for?
- Have they said anything about you that makes you think they have found out private information about you?

By listening to the child you will be able to better gauge potential risks (is there a current threat or not?) as well as the options available to the child to address the issue.

Explore with the child if there is a trusted adult in their life, perhaps a teacher or parent, who could support them.

If a child is unwilling to talk about specifics during the contact, encourage them to call back – give them time and space, if necessary.

Discuss practical options (see below).

WHEN A PARENT / CARER MAKES CONTACT

Commend the parent / carer for coming forward. It is likely that they will feel a range of emotions upon discovering that their child is being contacted by a stranger. They may feel angry, confused, scared and may blame themselves for what has happened.

What is key is that they understand that it is not their or their child's fault and they are not to blame for what has happened.

Encourage the parent to try to remain calm, to be non-judgmental and to avoid any panicky solutions. In particular, advise parents not to remove their

child's internet access – the most likely consequence of such an action would be that the child would not discuss future problems with the parent for fear of being cut-off from their digital lives.

Discuss practical advice (see below) with the parents and remind them that your helpline is available for their child to call for support - but do note that you won't be able to share the content of the call with the parent without the child's consent.

It is important that you discuss the potential emotional impact on the child – this will help the parent be alert to signs to watch out for as well as take a supportive approach to their child. Ask the parent to talk about:

- Any changes they have noticed in their child's behaviour.
- Whether they have any concerns for the child's mental health currently or historically.

Gathering this information will help inform you if any subsequent referral to the support services may be required. You should also ensure the parent is looking out for any subsequent changes in their child's behaviour, even if there have been no visible changes reported by the parent to you at this stage.

PRACTICAL ADVICE:

Take some time with the child to explore practical options that might help for the specific context that is being discussed.

Discuss technical options that the child might consider using – for example, adjusting security and privacy settings to prevent further contact, and blocking the individual or individuals responsible for the harassment. See the Privacy guide for more details and options.

Discuss whether the child might report the contact through the service provider's safety centre.

RED FLAGS:

- If the unknown person seems to know personal details about the child.
- The child has been threatened or blackmailed.

In the case of red flag issues emerging during your conversation, follow your standard escalation processes for intervention by law enforcement, child protection services, and so on, as appropriate.

