

International Edition

# **COVID-19 Global online safety advice for frontline workers supporting women**

# Supporting women to stay safe online

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while we are self-isolating or in home quarantine, many of us are relying on technology and social media to keep us connected to work, friends and the businesses or services we need.

This connection is important for all of us. However, for women experiencing domestic or family violence connecting online comes with risks.

For these women, being forced to remain in one place for an extended period is both frightening and dangerous. As daily pressures increase, we know that abusive behaviours also escalate, including some forms of technology-facilitated abuse.

## It is important to:

- be aware that technology-facilitated abuse is likely to be present in cases of domestic and family violence, and the harms it can cause
- recognise warning signs
- know how to help
- know how to improve technology safety
- keep children safe
- provide support for longer term responses.

This booklet is for frontline support workers — those responding to domestic and family violence as well as those engaged on the frontline of the COVID-19 response including doctors, nurses, social workers, pharmacists and other healthcare professionals.

Friends, neighbours and other local community members may also find this guide useful if they are supporting someone at risk of technology-facilitated abuse.

If this resource causes you distress in any way, please seek support.

Please note: these materials have been created by Australia's eSafety Commissioner for international use. The material is therefore general in nature. It is made available on the understanding that the eSafety Commissioner is not engaged in rendering professional advice.

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# Supporting women to stay safe online

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while we are self-isolating or in home quarantine, many of us are relying on technology and social media to keep us connected to work, friends and the businesses or services we need.





# Technology-facilitated abuse during COVID-19

Even before COVID-19, the UN recognised violence against women in domestic environments as a critical human rights violation. Now, with home quarantine, self-isolation and the move to virtual/remote work settings, this violence has increased. This includes abuse through technology, known as technology-facilitated abuse.

**Technology-facilitated abuse** is the use of technology to control, threaten, monitor or harass someone.

Abusive behaviours may include:

- denying access to devices and technology to isolate the victim so she is unable to contact specialist services for help and support, or to protect herself from abuse
- posting abusive comments about the victim on social media accounts or sending excessive amounts of voice calls, emails and texts
- using technology to control or manipulate home appliances, locks and connected devices
- using tracking devices in toys, cars and devices to monitor locations and activities
- creating a fake account to harass or abuse the victim, her friends and family
- sending menacing messages and images that threaten the victim, the people or pets she cares about
- sending menacing messages and images that aim to cause the victim reputational harm
- sharing or threatening to share intimate images without consent
- ‘doxing’ by posting the victim’s personal information on social media or elsewhere online.

Technology-facilitated abuse can be hard to pinpoint — the victim may know that something is wrong with her technology but can't necessarily say exactly what is causing it.

When working with a victim, it is important to trust her judgement, to take these behaviours seriously and to respond appropriately. In some countries these behaviours may be considered crimes under local laws and can be reported to the police, then taken to court.

A victim should make a comprehensive plan to improve the safety of herself and her children, using the support of a specialist family violence agency or charity (when it is safe for her to contact them). Advice in this booklet can help in the interim.



# Warning signs of technology-facilitated abuse

**Any threats to the personal safety of a woman or her children should be taken seriously and, where possible, referred to the police.**

**Technology-facilitated abuse is not always obvious – sometimes the victim may not be aware that technology is being used as part of her abuse.**

## **How does technology-facilitated abuse happen?**

Any internet-enabled platform or ‘smart’ device can be used to gather information about a victim and exert control over her.

This can include:

- email, social media platforms and apps, particularly where passwords have been shared or are easily guessed
- computers, laptops, smartphones and tablets
- internet-enabled devices ranging from fridges, game consoles, children’s toys, baby monitors, smart TVs and home assistants such as Amazon Echo and Google home
- Bluetooth headsets, medical devices, fitness trackers, smartwatches, car dashboard mounted cameras and GPS location functions
- small tracking devices or cameras which can be easily concealed
- spyware and malware on the victim's phone or computer
- online accounts for banking, public transport cards or toll roads.

## **Warning signs include that the abuser:**

- seems to know information he shouldn’t, such as where the woman and her children are or what they are doing
- insists that she share the passwords to her devices or accounts, or that she lets him physically access her device
- sets up a new camera or security system that seems unnecessary
- gives the children new electronic gifts and insists that these are used.

## **Also, the woman may tell you that she:**

- is unexpectedly ‘locked out’ of accounts, or passwords do not work anymore
- has online posts about her, or in her name, on fake social media accounts
- has fake email messages or posts sent from her accounts
- notices that her device is slower to power on or does not work as usual, the data usage spikes or the battery drains quicker than expected
- sees unknown financial transactions in her online accounts.

You may notice that she is reluctant to provide a contact number in case messages and calls are intercepted by the abuser.

It is critical to reassure the victim that you believe her, that she should trust her instincts and that you will try to help her to improve her safety. Remember to be careful not to use language that is judgemental or victim-blaming.



# How can I help?

**Frontline workers — including social workers, doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals — may be the only external contact a victim has during the pandemic. In some cases, a friend or other community member might also have this role. If you are in this position, it is important that you can recognise the signs of domestic violence, including technology-facilitated abuse, so you can help the victim to stay connected safely.**

Frontline workers may be replacing face-to-face support services with online delivery. Video calls or instant messages can help to connect with a woman remotely, however it is important to be aware that these calls or chats may not be private if the abuser is using the same technology to maintain control over their victim.

Home quarantine and self-isolation, while vital in combatting the pandemic, give power to abusers, with isolated victims unable to access safe devices outside of the home.

The best help you can give is to:

- believe the victim
- assist her in accessing safe technology, where possible
- offer support while she considers how to improve the long term safety of herself and her children.

## Support steps

### 1. Safety first

The most dangerous time for a woman in an abusive relationship is when she leaves or makes plans to leave. Leaving may not be an option during the pandemic.

Remember: never confront the abuser yourself or assume the victim is safe to disclose what is happening in her home. If the victim lives with an abusive partner, or has an abusive ex-partner, contact local support lines for advice and support before you do anything else.

### 2. Access to safe technology

Don't assume a victim has access to safe devices or technology. Making a telephone call or contacting an agency online may not be possible if the woman is living in an abusive household.

To help: provide safe access to information online, including these [How to videos](#) for step-by-step advice on strengthening the safety and security settings of the technology she uses. Ensure that the platforms you use to communicate with her are secure.

### 3. Planning for a safer future

It may not be safe for the victim to change her domestic arrangements at this time. Abusers may be working from home or not be working at all, and have more time to facilitate their abusive behaviour.

You can listen to, respect and offer the woman comfort. If safe to do so, keep in contact. Let her know you are there and can support her to make and carry out a plan when she may feel safe enough to leave the relationship.

### 4. Avoiding technology use is not the solution

Continued access to technology is important so women can stay connected to their trusted friends and family, and so they can get help from support services when in need. Simply turning off technology will further isolate them. Remember — abusers may escalate their behaviour if they feel they are losing control so it's important to leave some communication technologies in place.





# Online safety checklist

**To help improve a woman's overall safety it's important to encourage the safe use of technology. However, sometimes it is not safe for a woman to change her device or behaviour because it may trigger an increase in his abusive behaviour or alert the abuser to her plans to leave.**

As always, a woman's physical safety, and that of her children, must always come first. If you think someone is in immediate danger, call local police straight away.

The following advice can help you support a woman experiencing technology-facilitated abuse.

**1. Advise her to access information/help from a safe device** that the abuser cannot access or check. If you are with the victim, let her use your phone or computer.

**2. Be alert to the warning signs** that may indicate her technology has spyware or a tracking device on it. If this is the case, warn her that her abuser may find out if she uses it. For private conversations encourage her to use another safer device if possible.

**3. Support her to set up a new email account on a safe device** when making plans for the future and when communicating with frontline workers. Encourage her to use a pseudonym in any new email addresses. Advise her to keep using old email accounts for day-to-day communication that will not upset the abuser or make him suspicious.

**4. If safe to do so, suggest that she change the passwords** on all accounts, devices, email and social media. Passwords should not be saved into her browser. Encourage her to use different passwords for different accounts. For more information on creating safe passwords, see [securing your accounts and devices](#).

**5. Recommend that she increase the privacy and security of accounts** and check these regularly. For more information on privacy settings on games, apps and social media platforms see the [eSafety Guide](#) and these [How to videos](#). Key tips: change security questions to ones the abuser doesn't know, and use [two-factor authentication](#) to sign into accounts.

**6. Encourage her to use 'private' or 'incognito' mode** when browsing the internet. She could also delete the browser history for any time in which she was looking for information about how to get help or after visiting a website that might make the abuser angry.

**7. Discuss the need to set rules for safe social media use for her and her children** and make these rules known to friends and family. Warn her to be careful about who to accept as online friends and only add friends that she can trust. She should request that friends and family not communicate with the abuser about her or her location. For more information on how to safely use social media use a [social media checklist](#).

**8. Maintain contact as much as possible** — while it may be difficult to make unobserved contact, there are still supportive steps that frontline workers, friends and family can take. Some support agencies are rapidly adapting and developing new ways to deliver essential services for clients. Many have online options so help is still available.



# Keeping children safe

**Children in domestic and family violence situations face the challenges that all young people do in navigating their online lives. However, they are also frequently victims of technology-facilitated abuse, either through witnessing the impacts on their parents or by being targeted themselves. The need to stay at home during the COVID-19 pandemic adds extra stress to this challenge.**

## **Children and technology-facilitated abuse — warning signs**

There are a number of warning signs that a child or young person has been targeted by technology-facilitated abuse, either directly or as a means of targeting the mother.

### **These include:**

- children receiving gifts of new devices or internet-enabled toys which the abuser insists must be kept with them at all times — this could mean that the devices are fitted with spyware or tracking tools
- behavioural changes which could signify something is not right and that there are problems they are keeping to themselves so as not to worry their parents
- children seeking help from untrustworthy sources and putting themselves at risk, such as being 'groomed' by a sexual predator
- abusers setting up impersonator accounts to 'fake friend' their child and find out where they are and what they are doing
- abusers posting abusive content (about the child or about the other parent) on the child's social media accounts.

## **How to help**

There are a number of ways to help children and young people targeted by an abuser:

### **1. Involve**

Involve children and young people in online safety planning — this can help mothers and their children stay safely connected and prevent abusers from locating them on social media, their online accounts and devices.

### **2. Encourage**

Encourage age-appropriate conversations about safety, including how, what and when they should share information online.

Discuss the importance of:

- privacy online and family rules
- who to accept as online 'friends'
- the need to turn off location settings
- not posting photos that might indicate the child's location
- not tagging family members online.

### **3. Reassure**

Children impacted by domestic violence need extra support to feel safe and stay positive about the future — they need reassurance that there are people who love them and can provide protection.

### **4. Learn together**

During COVID-19, many children are at home full-time and spending more time online. This can be an opportunity to enjoy fun and productive time with children. Asking the child about the social media apps and games they use can be a good opportunity to talk about how they can better protect themselves online.

### **5. Support**

Children need to know there are people they can talk to safely and confidentially about how they feel.

**Online and telephone support services** can provide free and confidential support for children and young people.

Resources and tips are available from a number of websites. You may like to use **eSafety's Online safety advice for parents and carers during the COVID-19 pandemic** to help encourage safe online behaviours.





# Planning for a safer future

**While it may not be practical or safe for a victim of technology-facilitated abuse to make significant changes during the COVID-19 period, there are steps she can take to keep herself and her children safer, and to plan for the future.**

## 1. Assess risk

The level of risk a woman faces can escalate as she works toward leaving her abusive relationship. Her safety, and that of her children, is the absolute priority. She is the best judge of her situation and of how to minimise the risk of a dangerous reaction from the abuser.

If you think someone is in immediate danger, call local police straight away.

## 2. Collect evidence

Collecting evidence of the abuse — when it can be safely done — is critical in assisting police and the courts to hold the abuser accountable for his behaviour. This can include documenting events in a journal as well as saving screenshots, emails, text messages and other material.

Evidence should be stored securely and a copy given to a trusted friend or frontline worker in case the originals are damaged. Be careful to keep existing data on old devices — this can be valuable evidence.

However, if the abuser has access to the victim's devices or online accounts, it may be too risky for her to collect and store this kind of evidence. Her safety is the priority. If it's not safe to collect evidence, then she should not do it.

## 3. Make plans

In order to make a plan for the future, the victim should try to access a safe device, then seek legal advice on possible pathways that are appropriate to her situation and level of risk.

Remember that internet searches will leave a trail (or history) that the abuser might see. Where possible the victim should **use private or incognito browsing** when seeking information and help.

When it is safe to do so, the victim should also seek support from a specialist family violence agency and make a comprehensive plan to improve safety for herself and her children.

If you think someone is in immediate danger, call local police straight away.



# Self-care for those on the frontline

Victims of domestic and family violence rely on the support and help they receive from frontline workers, from trusted friends and family and from the broader community.

For those on the frontline, working with or supporting women who are experiencing domestic and family violence situations, mental health and wellbeing is also very important.

If you need support, please consider searching for a relevant online counselling or support service.

Remember to keep talking to your support networks, and to friends and family you can trust. We all need to find moments to connect, even if we are physically far apart.

**For more information about online safety, visit [esafety.gov.au](https://esafety.gov.au)**



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