A parent's guide to INTERNET CONTROLS

National Online Safety®

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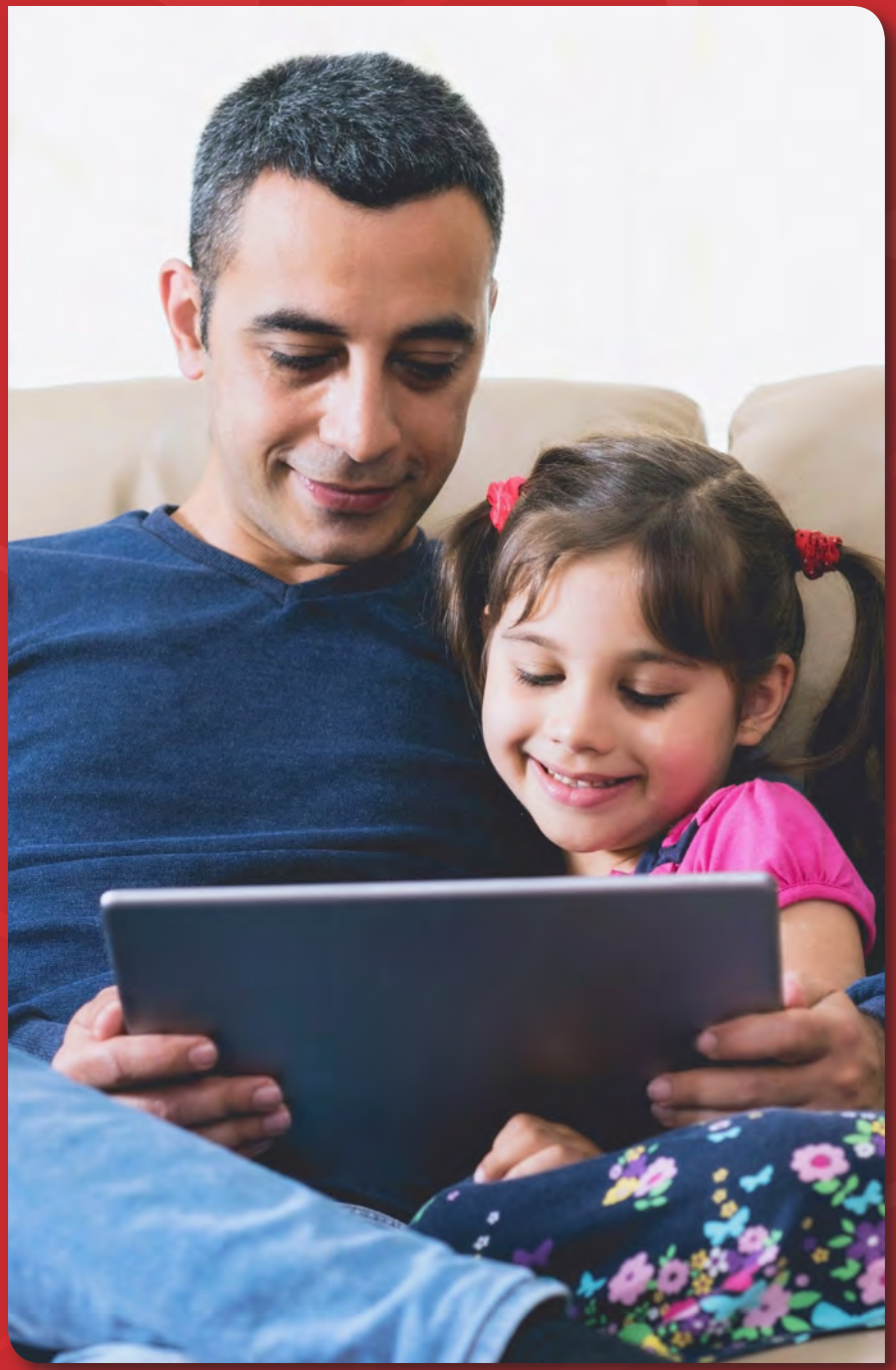

The internet is full of harmful content, which is why web filtering is such an important tool for any family. When running properly it helps to protect your children from the bad things on the internet, regardless of whether they're trying to access that type of content on purpose or it happens by accident.

While parental controls are generally lumped together as one, there are three main ways of providing them: via your Internet Service Provider (ISP), via a router or via software that you install. Each has its own benefits and downsides, and the best solution is often to use a combination of techniques to catch everything and prevent a child from bypassing your protection. In this brochure, we'll look at each type to see which ones are best for you.

Meet our expert

This guide has been written by David Ludlow. David has been a technology journalist for more than 20 years, covering everything from internet security to the latest computing trends and the smart home. A father of two (a nine-year-old and a six-year-old), he's had to control and manage how his children access online services and use apps.

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ROUTER FILTERING CONTROLS

Most routers provide internet filtering. The most basic models just let you type in a website that's blocked, which doesn't provide a very practical way of locking down your internet connection. However, many new routers and wireless mesh systems are upping their game when it comes to parental controls. They are providing more advanced controls, and that's what we're looking at here.

Although usually provided free, some manufacturers have a monthly charge for more advanced features. For example, with the Netgear Orbi System, you get basic filtering for free, but more advanced controls are available on a monthly subscription.

Using router controls, you can create profiles for each person in your home, assigning devices to each person. A child, for example, could have a profile that associates their laptop, phone and games console to them.

Filtering controls let you set which types of websites each profile can access, with more restrictive blocking for very young children, less stringent blocking for teenagers and unfettered access for adults.

In addition, profiles often let you set both when a profile can access the internet and for how long. You can even pause internet connection for a profile, blocking internet access temporarily for a child. As controls are applied for all devices, it means that a child can't swap to a different device to carry on using the internet.

The main downsides are twofold. First, protection doesn't work outside of your home, so a child has unrestricted internet access on other networks. Secondly, they can't control which apps your child can use, so you can't lock down applications and games so easily.

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PARENTAL SOFTWARE CONTROLS

Traditional parental control software is typically available as part of an anti-virus suite, although dedicated applications are also available. The software has to be installed on a child's devices, with most supporting Windows, Mac, iPhone (iOS) and Android. Control is typically via the web, letting you set the types of websites that a child can visit, and how long they're allowed to use devices for.

Parental control software has two main advantages over the other methods. First, it can be used to monitor and restrict which apps are being used, in addition to filtering websites. Secondly, the software continues to work no matter where the child is, so they can't bypass protection by connecting to a different wireless network, for example.

The downside is that the level of support is more restrictive and some devices, such as games consoles, won't be supported.

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ISP FILTERING CONTROLS

Your ISP will have its own filtering controls that you turn on for your entire internet connection. They're provided free of charge and provide a simple, baseline level of protection. The main benefit of these controls is that they don't require any software to be installed and will work on any device connected to the internet from a laptop to a games console.

The main issues come from the fact that the controls are simplistic. First, as controls apply to every device equally, everyone in your home gets the same level of filtering regardless of whether they're five-years-old or an adult. Secondly, ISP filters can't block specific applications, such as a game. Thirdly, ISP filters only work while you're at home; if a child takes their laptop or tablet elsewhere, there's no active filtering (note that BT's controls also work if you're signed into BT Wi-Fi).

Typically, ISP parental controls can be temporarily turned off (or run on a schedule) to allow adults access to other content. However, while the controls are turned off, the entire network is open, enabling a child to access anything they like.

It's worth mentioning the parental controls that mobile networks provide. These can be turned on to filter all web traffic from a child's smartphone when they're using the mobile network. The downside is that the controls aren't in force when a child connects to a wireless network, so you'll want to look into additional controls.

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WHICH TYPE IS THE BEST?

In truth, the best form of protection is to use multiple layers of protection. Parental control software is a great option for monitoring and controlling what a child can see and do on their computer, tablet or phone, and gives protection outside of your home. It's worth supplementing this control. If your router has advanced parental controls, then use this to control internet access on all of a child's devices, even those that don't support your software. ISP filtering should be used as a last resort, as it restricts what everyone can do, even you.

That said, make sure that your child's phone has internet filtering turned on so that your child remains protected even if they use mobile data.

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At National Online Safety we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information they need to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one platform of many which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.