

# Online Safety Newsletter

May 2025

Issue 5.



We will be continuing to send you half termly updates throughout the school year to support you at home with all things online safety related.

Did your children open up a new device in their stocking at Christmas? In our December edition we shared a useful guide for how to setup new devices for children.

Visit the online safety page of our website to read back and ensure you've set the devices with suitable parental controls.



[www.meridianschool.co.uk/parents/e-safety](http://www.meridianschool.co.uk/parents/e-safety)

## Voice Activated Searching

This edition looks at voice activated apps such as Alexa, Siri and Cortana. They can be really useful for quickly finding out information. They can also be beneficial for children with disabilities who struggle with using a keyboard to type. However as with any device which has access to the internet it is worth checking that suitable parental controls have been setup before allowing children access to them. [Follow this link for information about keeping in control of Amazon devices.](#)

## SCHOOL COUNCIL

We asked our school council reps in years 1 and 2 for their experiences with internet voice assistants. We even tried using Siri to access this newsletter...it worked!

"Alexa can be really useful because it can tell you about history or something you're really interested in like our topics at school"

"My mummy and daddy have set it up so that if there are rude words then Siri won't say them or play songs with rude words in"

"They are very expensive and definitely not a toy so should not be treated like one"

"It's still important to be respectful to everything around us including Siri and Alexa. Kindness is one of our school values so don't shout at Siri or Alexa"



## Year 5 & 6 mobile phones

If your child is in year 5 & 6 and brings their phone to school please can you remind them that children are not permitted to have their phone switched on whilst they are on the school site. This includes when walking across the playground or in the car park.

Our policy is phones should remain off at the end of the day until they have gone through the gates at the front and back of the school.

Phones are not permitted in any other year group.

Thank you for supporting keep them safe.



## Get in touch!

Do you have a question or topic about online safety you'd like help with? Email the school office with 'Online Safety' in the subject and we'll do our best to include it in the next edition.



Part of our Online Information Series



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What you need to know about...

# VOICE ACTIVATED SEARCHING

## What is it?

### 'Voice Activated Searching'

Voice activated search, also known as 'voice search' or 'voice-enabled search' is a search tool that allows the user to use a voice command to search the internet, a website, or an app. It is commonly associated with smart speakers or digital assistants such as Alexa, Siri and Cortana. They can be used on smart phones and also operate on separate devices like the Amazon Echo or Google Home. They are particularly beneficial for children with disabilities who struggle with using a keyboard.

**\*Ahem\* Ok Kloe, what's the number for National Online Safety?**

**...Okay. Here is the number I have found.  
0800 368 8061**

## Know the Risks

### Data Misuse

This is one of the biggest concerns about voice activated search. Many times, we do not know where our data is being stored and how it will be used. Before using a voice activated search, it is always good practice to know what happens to our data once we hand it over to digital assistants.

### Forming bad manners

There is a concern that children will get used to giving commands instead of politely requesting for something when using a voice search. They may think that such behaviour is considered normal and it could influence how they speak offline in the real world.

### Adult content

Children can ask questions that may not be appropriate for their age. Voice assistants aren't able to identify the age of a user and hence might provide them with answers that may not be suitable for their age group. Similarly, devices may play explicit versions of songs if no parental controls are applied.

### Online purchases

If you have your credit card or other online payment information linked to your voice activated search, then there is a risk that children could make unauthorised purchases, potentially racking up huge bills.

## Safety Tips

### Use it together

When using voice activated searching, it's important to do it together with your child, especially at the initial stages. This will help them to become familiar with it and to understand how it should be used properly. Teach them how useful it can be and remind them to always speak politely, even when issuing commands.

### Set parental controls

Review the parental settings on your devices. Implement filters and block any access to explicit or adult related content. Remove connected cards or implement safety measures to ensure children cannot spend freely.

### Keep security software updated

Keep software updated on your devices to help keep the voice activated search feature secure. Use two-factor authentication whenever possible and set a strong password to avoid the risk of hacking.

### Mute speaker when not in use

On smart speakers installed at home, it's good practice to mute the speakers when not in use or to just unplug the device when in standby mode. This reduces the risk of the speaker misidentifying an activation command and helps to improve your privacy and security.

## Wider Benefits

### Can improve learning

Voice activated searching can be used as an educational tool to help stimulate children's critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For instance, it can help children with their spelling, solving mathematical problems and also with reading, writing and their time-management.

### Help reduce screen time

When used correctly, voice activated search can help to reduce the amount of time children spend in front of a screen. This could be in the form of a story, conducting a quiz or playing music rather than watching TV or playing computer games.

### Learning assistant for children with SEND

Smart speakers can be a beneficial digital assistant for children with SEND since it removes the need for typing. Some children may struggle using a keyboard or having to multitask so using voice activated search can be a good tool to help children be digitally connected.

## Our Expert Parven Kaur



Parven Kaur is social media expert and digital media consultant who is passionate about improving digital literacy for parents and children. She has extensive experience in the social media arena and is the founder of Kids N Clicks; a web resource that helps parents and children thrive in a digital world.





## What parents & carers need to know about...

# AMAZON ALEXA

Alexa is an artificial intelligence (AI) software assistant created by Amazon in 2014 through which smartphone, tablet and smart device users can issue voice commands and ask questions in a range of languages by issuing the 'wake' or activation word Alexa. It can be accessed in several ways and is integrated into a growing number of 'smart' products including speakers, phones and clocks. Once viewed as expensive gimmicks, Alexa is now one of the most used voice assistants in the world.

### Privacy concerns

By their nature, AI voice assistants involve the collection of large amounts of data. How this is stored and the uses to which it is put has aroused growing concern. Experts also worry about who has access to voice recordings, which in 2019 the company admitted sometimes included employees of Amazon and its commercial partners. There is also the more general anxiety that internet voice assistants might record private conversations and not only commands or questions.

### Age-inappropriate content

Using Alexa as a speaker to play your favourite songs is one of the most popular uses for the device. However, without any parental controls in place, Alexa won't filter the lyrics so it's possible that children could hear something they shouldn't. Similarly, Alexa isn't always able to identify who or what age the person is who is issuing a voice command so if children ask a question which might not be age-appropriate, the chances are they're likely to get an age-inappropriate answer.

18+

### Insecure devices

The devices and their background services are another worry, which can have software vulnerabilities that make them insecure in complex ways. In 2020, for instance, researchers discovered that the services to which Echo products connect were insecure, potentially allowing hackers to access personal information such as voice conversations. In 2017, researchers were able to directly hack an Amazon Echo to send audio to attackers. Amazon has a good record of fixing security problems when they are discovered but it is never possible to find every problem.

### Changing Tech Relationships

In a 2019 report published by the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, concerns were raised on the disruptive effect that voice assistants and smart speakers, such as Alexa, were having on the way that children interact with technology. From building sentiment and forming relationships which could encourage them to overshare personal details, to a fear of consuming content driven by commercial algorithms and an inability to assess reliability, how Alexa operates could considerably change children's relationship with technology in both the short and long term.



PRIVATE

## Safety Tips

### Check privacy settings

It's possible to delete Alexa's recordings either entirely, or for a given period, with the instruction "Alexa, delete everything I said." Alternatively, set up the Alexa account privacy settings for that account to delete recordings every three or 18 months. Existing recordings made using the Alexa app can be deleted via Settings > Alexa Privacy > Review Voice History. A final tweak is to turn off the setting that allows Amazon to 'use voice recordings to improve Amazon services.'

### Control voice input

If privacy is paramount, one idea is to locate Echo devices in only one room rather than having several throughout the home. In addition, Alexa can be activated only when it is needed by manually turning off the microphone on Echo devices between use. Users can tell when Alexa is in listening mode as an indicator light should appear or an audible tone should sound.

### Set pin code

Amazon account users can order items from the company using a voice command, for example "Alexa, buy some toilet paper." To counter accidental use or misuse and avoid racking up big bills, this can either be disabled or protected with a PIN code (it should be noted that this is an audible PIN however, so is not as secure as a typed code).

### Look out for 'Skills' apps

A big appeal of Alexa is that thousands of companies have created apps, which Amazon calls 'skills', that add useful capabilities, often integrations with other products or services. These are installed by asking Alexa to 'open/play/start' the skill. For example, a travel skill might be installed to check and automate checking train times and hotel bookings. However, it's important to remember that each of these might have a different privacy policy. A cautious approach is to install as few as possible, de-installing ones no longer in use.

### Talk about technology

As more and more homes install voice assistants and smart speakers such as Alexa, it's a good idea to talk to children about safe use of technology. Talk to them about what Alexa can be used for, how useful it can be and how to use it properly. Use it together to begin with and discuss any concerns they might have. Always make sure that children know to never share any personal or sensitive information and that if they need to talk about anything, they should always speak to a trusted adult.

### Meet our expert

John E. Dunn has edited and written for numerous computer and technology magazines since the early 1990s, most recently Which Computing, The Register, Forbes.com, Techworld, Computerworld and Naked Security. He is a specialist in online cybersecurity and cybercrime and their growing effect on education, young people and the public.

