

Virtual CHILDHOOD



UNDERSTANDING OUR CHILDREN'S LIVES ONLINE

Caroline Ellen

SAFER STRONGER KIDS

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR
BEING HERE.

Let me be upfront. Parts of this eBook aren't going to feel very good. They're going to feel uncomfortable and challenging. You might find yourself hoping that I'm making some of this up, and you're probably going to want to stop reading more than once.

I'm not going to beat around the bush. I'm not going to hold back or apologise for the discomfort it creates. If we're not willing to talk about the hard stuff, we certainly won't be able to start fixing it.

The truth is that our children are up against it at the moment. There's serious stuff going on behind closed doors.

As adults, it's our job to do something about it, and the first step is to sit with the discomfort involved in the learning. If we don't, we're leaving our kids to manage a whole host of dangers all on their own, and that just isn't fair.

I want to talk to you about what's going on for our children online. The risks, the impacts, and what we need to start doing about it.

Thank you so much for being here.





For the most part, parents are well aware that it isn't ideal for children to spend their whole day on a screen. Parents worry about how to regulate the amount of time their child spends playing on their iPads, phones, watching TV, and video gaming.

But as a social worker and parent educator, my biggest concern for your child isn't how MUCH time they spend on a screen. Rather, my biggest concern is HOW they spend their time when they're on a screen. What apps are they using? What are they watching? Who are they talking to?

During 2020, reports of online bullying have increased by 87%. Reports of online child exploitation have increased by 120%. Revenge porn has increased by 245%.

Children are online more and supervised less, making them vulnerable and easy targets for online predators, who also have more time to fill. They have the time and we're giving them the opportunity.

It's clear that the online world isn't a safe space for children. Let's talk more specifically about what's going on and what we can do about it.

Caroline Ellen

CAROLINE ELLEN
Founder of Safer Stronger Kids

WHAT
ARE THE
risks?

RISK #1: ONLINE PREDATORS

Online predators might look like creepy old men hiding in basements. But they aren't only that. They could be anyone, and they could be any age, older children included. The only thing they have in common is what they want.

What they want is easy, unsupervised access to your child.

Many apps and games feature the capacity to talk with strangers, often to the surprise of parents. Interactions with predators generally start in an unassuming way, perhaps a compliment about your child's looks or dancing. The predator may pretend to be a child with a connection to your child ('I know that school! I know someone who goes there.') or they may be upfront about their age. Most importantly, they'll start to build rapport and trust. They'll ask for personal information and for photos. At first, the interactions feel positive to the child. They feel like they're making a friend.

But the requests for regular photos will likely escalate to requests for nudes. Requests become demands, perhaps with threats to reveal previous photos to family members or schools. A child may be told, 'No one will love you if they find out what you've done' or 'You'll be in so much trouble.'

Predators may attempt to meet up with a child in person and/or start demanding increasingly traumatic photos and videos. The child may now be engaging in self-produced child abuse material, featuring only themselves or including siblings.

You might be thinking, 'Not my kid. They wouldn't fall for this. They'd know better.' I need to stop you right there. Predators put a whole lot of time and energy into getting their way. Yes, you can trust your child but you can't trust the person they are up against. They are committed and they are good at what they do.

All of this is as traumatic as it sounds. We need to remember that even if it 'only' happens online, it doesn't make it any less real. This is sexual abuse. The impacts can last a lifetime.

Impacts may include low self-worth, PTSD, anxiety, depression, self-harming behaviours, problematic sexualised behaviours, and an increased risk of being sexually abused again. These experiences affect a child's ability to concentrate in school and to maintain friendships and relationships. Their sense of safety and trust in the world has been shattered and can take a very long time (and a lot of work) to recover.

RISK #2: PORNOGRAPHY

Children are now being exposed to pornography between 8 - 11 years of age (depending on which study you look at, when it was done, and who you ask).

And let's be clear, pornography has changed. It's often violent, degrading, and doesn't teach anything positive to do with love, consent, or healthy relationships. In fact, a high percentage of the content found on the major porn sites isn't consenting actors. It features victims of sex trafficking, victims of revenge porn, and victims of sexual abuse and rape, including teenagers. You don't have to be on the dark web to access this stuff. Anyone can access it any time, there's no form of age verification, and it's completely free.

Children are being exposed to pornography in a variety of ways. They may come across it by accident. They may be shown pornography by peers or even older siblings. They might get curious and google 'sex' because it's easier to google than to risk the embarrassment of asking an adult.

So, why does this matter?

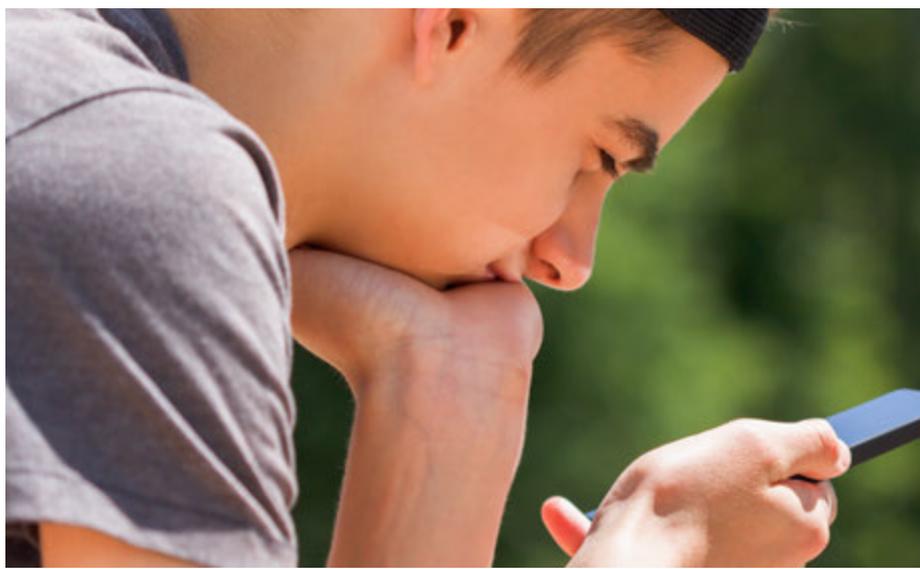
Predators have long used pornography as part of the grooming process because it normalises sexualised activity. It makes the child more likely to comply to the 'private games' the predator suggests next. Exposure to pornography, therefore, makes a child a more vulnerable target for sexual abuse.

We know that children who are exposed to pornography are left traumatised by what they've seen. They don't understand it and want to make sense of what they've seen. In order to attempt to process it, they may well go looking for it again. If the parent or carer doesn't recognise what has happened and put protections in place, a child can develop a pornography addiction.

This next point may be the most uncomfortable truth I need to share with you. Children who have been exposed to pornography will need ways to process and understand what they've seen. As mentioned above, they may do this by going looking for it again. They may also do this by acting out what they have seen on other children. Their trauma, therefore, becomes another child's trauma. It's for this reason that the rates of child-on-child sexual abuse have been increasing over recent years.

Many teenagers are viewing pornography as if it is an appropriate form of sex education. It is shaping their sexuality and not in positive ways. Given that 'neurons that fire together wire together', we have to ask, 'What neural pathways are being formed as our teenagers watch violent pornography? Are they linking violence with sexual gratification?' If so, it's no surprise when they both expect and require violence to achieve sexual gratification in the real world.

Again, we all want to reach for some self-protection at this point. We want to say, 'Not my kid.' Please remember that viewing pornography isn't an indication of a 'bad kid'. It's what happens when curious children stumble into an online world that simply isn't intended for them. A child who has been viewing pornography doesn't need to get in trouble. They need the space to talk about what they've seen and protections in place to stop them finding it again.



RISK #3:

CYBER-BULLYING

Once upon a time, children who were bullied at school could seek refuge at home. That refuge no longer exists since their bullies are able to reach them even in the middle of the night when they're alone in their bedrooms. There's no time for recovery, there's no reprieve, there's no escape.

The power of their bullies follows them everywhere they go. Emboldened by anonymity and apps specifically designed for sharing their thoughts on others, children and teenagers are saying things about each other and to each other that they would never dream of saying in real life.

And once again, even if it only happens online, it doesn't make it any less real. The ramifications can last a lifetime.

Our brains are designed to cope with positive and tolerable stress. We can stage a strong recovery so long as we have support, so long as the stress is time-limited, and so long as we retain some sense of control. Online bullying can strip a child of each of these protective factors. The stress is toxic leaving children at increased risk of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and social isolation.



RISK #4: INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

Take a walk through TikTok's 'For You' feed.

What do you see? In five minutes, you'll likely be exposed to drug references, violence, swearing, sexually explicit messaging, porn references, and humiliation as a form of entertainment. Click on any of these videos and the algorithms will adjust. Now you'll see more of what just drew your attention.

'We've all been seeing this for years,' you might be thinking. 'Watch any Hollywood movie and you'll probably see all of the above. What's the difference?'

The key difference is that when you watch a movie, you know you're watching actors. You know it isn't real. It's carefully staged and curated.

But when our children view this content on social media, they see real people. They see real people doing horrible things to other real people. They see these videos getting thousands of 'likes' and going viral.

Our children and teenagers are sponges, constantly soaking up all the information they can about the world. Given this, I have to ask you: how do you think this content shapes their view of the world and their view of how they should engage with the world?

Left to view it alone, without a conscientious parent countering the destructive messages, what will they make of it? How will it shape their decision making in the future?

There's a lot of creative, interesting, and worthwhile content on apps like TikTok. But there's no way that the good stuff outweighs the bad.

And even if it did, is it really worth the risk?



RISK #5: CHANGES TO THE BRAIN

How we focus our attention matters. Neurons that fire together, wire together. This means that our brains wire themselves to adapt to the environment. The more we repeat an experience, the stronger that particular brain pathway will become. The stronger the pathway, the easier and faster it is for the brain to use. Because brains are a bit lazy, they'll always prefer a well-constructed superhighway to the road less travelled. You can change your brain and build new pathways, but it will take focused effort and repeated practice.

Our brains love the internet. That's because the internet tends to require low amounts of effort for high levels of reward. We don't have to exert much energy or challenge our thinking to get super-charged hits of dopamine which help us feel great (at least, for that moment). Our brains enjoy and adapt to this process and want us to go back for more.

Why does any of this matter, and how does it relate to our children?

It matters because we need to be thinking about how the internet is shaping our children's brains. What environment does the internet create, and how are their brains adapting to that?

For example:

If we do most of our reading online, our brain adjusts to short bursts of information and will start to find longer reading sessions more challenging. We want the information right now, and we don't want to have to work for it.

If we spend a lot of time scrolling or watching short video clips, we will start to crave novelty. We NEED the information to change to maintain our attention.

If we become accustomed to finding information immediately, we may lose the ability to research more deeply.

If all our downtime is spent consuming entertainment that is 'low effort, high reward', we'll find it increasingly difficult to entertain ourselves when no screen is available. We'll get bored more quickly and won't know what to do about it.

If the majority of our communication with others is via text, we grow a brain that prefers this as a method of relating to others. We might start to find in-person dialogue more difficult to manage. We might feel uncomfortable picking up the phone and building rapport, preferring instead to hide behind the screen.

Take a closer look over these adaptations. What are your thoughts? Do they promote positive mental health? Are they adaptations that will serve your children well throughout their life?

I'm aware that, as you read this information, you might want to dismiss what I'm saying. You might be wanting to call me a technophobe or tell me to lighten up. You might be thinking:

It's not that bad.

Not my kid.

That's just the way the world is now.

The truth is, I'm not a technophobe. These technologies have brought us so many benefits. But my concerns rest in what they mean for our children. What risks do they face when we throw them in the deep end, without pause, without consideration of the potential shadows? We need to understand the issues and the benefits.

We need to work out how to embrace the good that technology has to offer while responsibly acknowledging and managing the risks.

So then - what are we going to do about it?

Now that we've acknowledged the risks,
what are we going to do about them?



SO WHAT
CAN
We do?

THE FIRST STEP IS TO FOCUS ON REDUCING THOSE RISKS WHEREVER WE CAN.

STEP 1 **All devices must stay in public places**

If it has internet access, it doesn't go behind a closed door. Would you open your front door to a stranger, lead them to your child's room, let them in, and then close the door behind you? Of course you wouldn't. Online is no different.

STEP 2 **Lock devices up at night**

Yes, your child is trustworthy and a good kid... but the temptation to wait until you're asleep to sneak on to those devices can become overwhelming. Don't take that risk. Once your child is online overnight, you truly have no idea what's going on. Take responsibility for where every device goes at night, every night.

STEP 3 **Use content filters**

It's a non-negotiable part of protecting children from stumbling across or deliberately searching for pornography. Filters will also alert you to what they are attempting to search for when you're not watching, enabling you to stay one step ahead and respond appropriately.

STEP 4 **NO devices at playdates**

If friends are coming over, then devices don't come with them, and yours can be put away. Think that's an awkward conversation? It's less awkward than the conversations you might find yourself having if you don't. Children find and share inappropriate content with their friends because it feels exciting, fun, and grown-up to do so. Don't let it happen under your roof.

STEP 5 **Keep learning and stay involved**

Don't check out because you think your kids are too old for your opinion. Don't hide behind the idea that they need to learn to self-regulate their device use. Use tools such as the 'Safe on Social Toolkit' and the 'National Online Safety' website to understand what apps your kids are using, whether they should be using them, the risks associated with each one, and what parental controls you can put in place.

STEP 6 **Don't rely on the age recommendations listed on the app store**

Little known fact: the 13+ age recommendation is to do with data collection and privacy laws NOT child safety. Look to the cyber safety experts for their recommendations instead.

STEP 7 **Delay your child's ability to access the internet (You Tube included) for as long as you can**

Yes, you'll feel old school and friends might look at you like you've lose the plot. But, I promise, you're never going to look back and regret *not* letting them have internet access, a phone, or an iPad - and neither will they.

STEP 8 **Courageous communication with friends and family**

Talk to others about what you've learnt, what rules you have in place, and why. We claim these things are private or too personal to avoid the potential awkwardness of talking about them. We want to avoid the discomfort we might feel if we find ourselves disagreeing with others. 'It's not my place,' we'll say.

You can't dictate what rules a person has in place for their own children but you can expect them to respect the rules you have for your child, especially when your child is in their care. It's possible to communicate those expectations with empathy and love. We need to embrace the awkwardness.

STEP 9 **Avoid digital amputation**

If your children are worried you'll take their devices away if they break the 'acceptable use' policy, they won't tell you when they've stumbled across something that has left them feeling unsafe or ashamed. Open the door to the conversations by letting them know you won't be mad and they won't be in trouble when they talk to you about what they've seen or done.

STEP 10 **Supervision**

No filter and no amount of rules can replace the benefits of having your eyes on the screen alongside your child. It's not easy, but it's definitely worth it.

I KNOW IT'S A LOT. BUT DON'T DISMISS THESE IDEAS
SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY REQUIRE EFFORT.

THEY MIGHT MAKE A LIFETIME OF DIFFERENCE FOR YOUR CHILD,
AND THAT HAS TO BE WORTH IT.



Let's talk about the second step: **talking to our children** about the risks they might face online.

People often shy away from these conversations, concerned they might give their children ideas or make them anxious and worried. In reality, neither is true.

Our children want to learn about life and the world, and they want to learn from us. When we're honest (in an age-appropriate way), we open the door to the most important conversations we'll ever have with our children. We let them know we're available to them, that we can be their go-to person, and that we'll treat their questions (and them) with respect.

HERE'S SOME EXAMPLES OF THINGS YOU CAN SAY TO A YOUNGER CHILD ABOUT THE RISKS THEY FACE ONLINE:

'It's easy for people online to pretend to be someone they aren't. We have to be really careful to make sure you're only ever talking to people you actually know.'

'Nobody should ever ask you for pictures of private parts. It doesn't matter who they are, if they do that, they are doing the wrong thing. If it ever happens, you wouldn't be in trouble. I would just want you to tell me so that I can make sure it doesn't happen again. Private parts are called that because they are just for you.'

'If you ever see, or get sent, pictures of private parts, please tell me. It's my job to make sure that doesn't happen.'

'A lot of stuff online isn't meant for kids. I don't want you to wind up seeing stuff that you can't un-see. If you ever see anything that makes you feel worried, scared, embarrassed, or that you don't understand, please bring it to me. You won't be in any trouble.'

'People often say things online that they wouldn't say if you saw them in person. It's like they think that saying it online makes it less real. But that's not true, and it's not okay. If you see or experience anything like that, tell me so I can help.'

There are ways to make these conversations easier for ourselves and our kids.

Firstly, we can always use the proper terms for all the private parts of the body. We can answer questions about puberty and bodies with honesty. We can talk to our girls about what happens for boys and talk to boys about what happens for girls.

We can tackle conversations about sex before they reach an age where they decide to google out of curiosity.

We can lose the phrase, 'You don't need to know that until you're older' and, instead, find an age-appropriate way to answer their questions. If you need to, tell them you'll come back to them later that day and get the information or support you need to continue the conversation.

When we embrace this way of talking with our children, we open the door to the most important conversations we'll ever have with them. We let them know we are available to them, that we can be their go-to person, and that we'll treat their questions (and them) with respect.

As our children mature, so will our conversations. Examples of what you could say to your teenagers include:

'The stuff kids are seeing online, so much of it doesn't reflect real life or any of our values. Tell me what you think about it.'

'When we're tired, our thinking brain (the pre-frontal cortex) goes to bed before we do, and we wind up watching things or saying things that we wouldn't normally, and so does everyone else. That's one reason why you're not allowed your phone in your room. It's not because I don't trust your judgement. It's that our brains literally turn off our good judgement at night. Mine included!'

'My worry is that a lot of teenagers might think that porn is sex ed. They think it's teaching them about what to do in real life. It's even training their brain to expect, in real life, the stuff they've seen online. And, in truth, what kids are seeing isn't even sex. It's just about power. It doesn't teach anything about love, or consent, or respect.'

'You know, people asking you for nudes or sending dick pics is really not okay. It's sexual harassment. You deserve better than that. It's certainly not how people show each other that they care.'

'It feels to me like your time on your phone is creating tension and stress. We need to come up with a plan that works for both of us. What do you think we should do?'

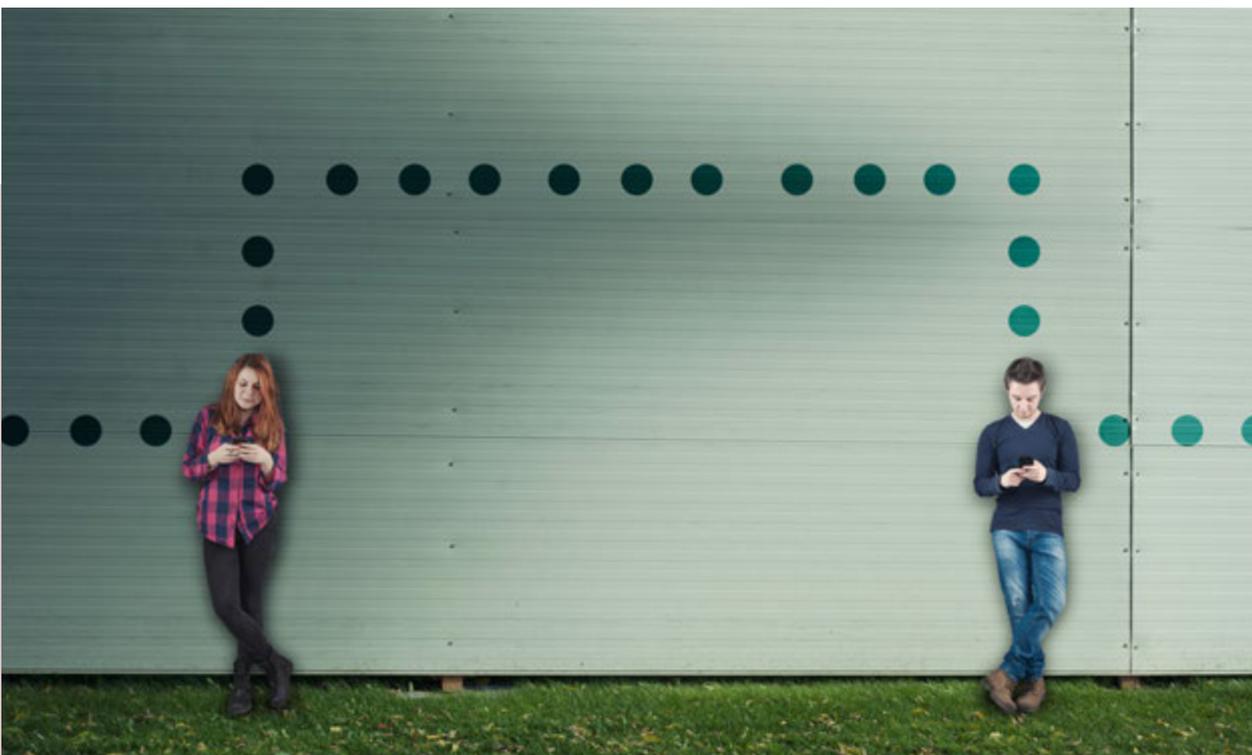
'Keeping you safe is my responsibility. I can't keep you safe on that app because of how it's designed. The answer has to be no. The stuff on there really is only for adults.'

These aren't one-off, tick-the-box conversations. Our goal is to create a family culture where topics like body safety, online safety, consent, sexuality, relationships, and pornography are always on the agenda.

As you've realised by now, **there's a lot we can do in our own homes** and with our children and teenagers to help them stay safe online.

But it can't be, or it shouldn't be, only up to us. These safety issues are part of a much broader social problem, and it shouldn't be left to individuals to respond and manage them. Social and systems change is desperately required, but, so far, we're not making much progress.

What social changes would make a difference and help children stay safe?



HERE ARE THE QUESTIONS I THINK WE NEED TO BE ASKING EACH OTHER.

What if delaying iPad and smartphone use became a cultural norm?

Would it be easier for individual families to keep younger children safe online (because, simply, they wouldn't be online yet)?

Many parents and schools argue that children need to get started on tech early in order to be prepared later in life. But, do they really?

We know that many Silicon Valley execs are sending their children to screen-free schools and refusing phones for as long as they can, because they understand the risks.

They also know the tech they are building is intuitive and easy to use, so it can be learnt quickly.

So what if we switched to 'green' life instead of 'screen' life for our kids en masse? Would they really be behind... or could this actually be the recipe for getting them ahead?

If communication and teamwork between parents became a cultural norm, would it be easier for each individual family to help their children stay safe?

It's hard to keep a child off Snapchat when all their friends are on it, but what if all their parents kicked them off it at the same time? We need to be willing to pick up the phone, talk about our worries, and talk about how we can work together.

If we generate more public conversations about the risks for children online, it would be easier for individual families to gain access to the information they need and to realise that these are risks to which they cannot afford to turn a blind eye.

Is that enough? Can we keep our children safe online through the individual and social changes we've outlined above?

The answer is yes... and no. We can do a lot, but we can't do it alone.

We need systemic changes as well. Here's the questions I think we need to be asking our politicians.

Should children and teenagers be able to access high-speed, free pornography?

Obviously, no. It shouldn't even be something parents need to be thinking about, because we should have laws in place to prevent its availability in the first place.

Age verification technology exists but hasn't been mandated. Why not?

Why aren't we stepping up and demanding it? Age verification won't fix everything, but it would make a difference, and any difference is important.

We need to hold our governments to account. If we're busy doing everything we can to protect our children, our governments should be doing that too.

Should app developers and social media companies be able to produce and profit from apps that blatantly put children in harm's way? Should responsibility for policing apps lie with parents or government bodies?

Unless an app has been built from the bottom up with child safety in mind, why is it even available for our children to download?

Should app developers and social media companies be held to account when they fail to moderate content and children experience harm as a result?

If TV programs are mandated to carefully adhere to age recommendations, why aren't we expecting the same level of management from internet-based platforms?

What are we doing to proactively prevent children from being exposed to harm on the internet?

What programs are our governments putting in place for all school students to promote body safety and combat online harm, including the impact of pornography?

Every layer of the conversation about online safety is difficult, and every layer seems to fill us with a new level of discomfort, worry, and even shame.

We worry that we haven't been doing enough for our kids, and we might feel shame about what they've already experienced.

We're parenting children in what is truly a brave new world of technology.

We need to keep learning, talking, and adapting.

I'd like to leave you with a final thought. Use this to guide your decision making around the internet's place in the life of your child.

It's this:

We need to do everything we can to ensure that we are the ones using technology, instead of technology using us.

Thank you so much for being here and tackling this topic with me.

I know it wasn't easy, and I appreciate every moment of your time.



MEET THE AUTHOR

CAROLINE ELLEN

Caroline Ellen is a social worker and parenting coach who believes all children deserve a childhood free to play and discover.

Caroline is the founder of Safer Stronger Kids and on a mission to improve children's physical and emotional safety through stronger parent-child relationships.

Caroline's style is raw, real, and relatable. As a mum of two girls (4 and 1), she's in the trenches alongside you. She combines personal and professional experience to help connect parents back to themselves and their children.

“Safer, stronger parenting isn't about what we do. It's about who we are as we do it.”

HAVE QUESTIONS?

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Your children WANT to learn about their bodies, their lives, and the world, and they want to learn from you. These conversations will only ever be as awkward as YOU make them.

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