

Part of our Copyright & Ownership Series



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What you need to know about... PEER-TO-PEER (P2P) SHARING



What is it?

'Peer-to-Peer' (P2P) Sharing

Peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing is the process of transferring digital content, such as electronic books, music, or video clips from one computer to another. In a P2P network, each 'peer' is an end-user's computer connected to the other 'peer' via the internet. Typically, this is done with the help of P2P software programmes, such as Napster or BitTorrent, where files are indexed on a central server, making them available for other users to find and download.



Know the Risks

Malware

The nature of P2P networks makes it possible for one file to be shared to millions of computers, which makes these files the perfect tool for hackers to spread malicious software. This could be in the form of spyware, viruses, or trojan horses which can sit quietly on your PC collecting information and modifying your security settings.

Illegal downloads

Not only can malware be unintentionally downloaded onto your PC, it's also possible to mistakenly download copyrighted material. Doing so, and subsequently sharing this material with others, is against the law and could result in a significant financial penalty.

Oversharing

P2P software itself can be risky, and many applications do not comply with privacy settings. Some applications automatically share folders that contain media so instead of sharing a few photos, you may end up sharing your entire photo library.

Inappropriate content

P2P software could give users, including children, access to pornographic material. Some files containing pornography may be deliberately mislabelled to attract more downloads. Furthermore, the software may have built-in chat functionality, which could expose children to grooming, bullying or online abuse.

Safety Tips

Install security software

If your child is using P2P file-sharing software, it's important that you also have reputable security software installed which is up to date. This will alert you if any malware or viruses have been installed onto your machine and will often help you remove them once detected.

Avoid chat functionality

As mentioned, one of the many dangers of P2P file-sharing is that it can often expose your child to strangers. Keep an eye on the software they're using and ensure it doesn't have built-in chat capabilities. If it does, it's worth downloading a more reputable alternative, such as BitTorrent.

Explain the risks

Be sure to explain the risks of P2P file-sharing to your child, as this could help prevent any security or potential legal issues. Ensure that they are aware that seemingly innocent-looking content could potentially contain digital nasties, and that installing copyrighted material is against the law.

Educate yourself

If your child is using P2P file-sharing, perhaps to download music or TV shows, it's important you're aware of the risks. Many file-sharing services offer parent's guides that explain the risks of their software, how it can be used safely and legally, and the level of parental controls they provide.

Further Support

Use safer options

Although P2P file-sharing is still popular with millions of users across the globe, there is now much safer software available at your child's disposal, particularly if they don't feel safe using P2P file-sharing. If your child is using P2P software to download music or films, perhaps it's worth signing them up to a streaming service such as Apple Music, Spotify, Netflix, or Amazon.

Report and offer support

If your child feels at risk due to exposure to strangers or bullying, or due to exposure to harmful material, offer comfort and support. Encourage your child to avoid using P2P file-sharing websites and software. Keep proof of any messages they have received if you need to contact the police or local authorities.

Our Expert Carly Page



Carly Page is an experienced and highly respected freelance technology journalist, editor and consultant. Previously the editor of tech tabloid *The INQUIRER*, Carly now works as the news editor for *Computer Shopper* and *IT Pro* and writes for a number of publications including *Forbes*, *TechRadar*, *Tes*, *The Metro*, *uSwitch* and *WIRED*.