Doing digital in later life:
A practical guide

There's no one size fits all when it comes to going digital in later life. You don't need to be a technical whizz to help an older person do things online – being patient and encouraging is what matters most. So, whether you're a relative, friend, carer, or front line worker, these quick practical tips will help get you started.

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Getting people online

Chat with people about any experiences of digital and how comfortable they feel using it. Take a broad view of what 'digital' means. Ask if they need help with any electronic devices at home. For example, they might want to know how to work their digital heating system or Smart TV, or get more out of their smart phone.

Look for opportunities to gently introduce digital benefits – looking up opening times on an outing, for example. Find a good hook, like listening to a favourite old song, checking the sports results, video-calling family, or joining online faith services. Games or puzzles can be a fun place to start, and people often find photos or videos appealing.

Get to know someone's interests. Ask about what they enjoy so you can link digital activities to their everyday lives.

Talk openly about online safety from the start. Ask people what worries they have, so you can reassure them. Be prepared to spend a lot of time on this.

Top websites to start with:

- BBC news or sport
- Zoom
- Money Saving Expert
- YouTube

Remember: Older people must feel strongly motivated if they're to give digital a go. Focus on real-life relevance not 'improving digital skills' and help people do things they want to do.

Making support accessible

Go to where people are, whether that's a private home, a care setting or a community space they know like a café. Consider offering support at an existing group, like a lunch club or coffee morning.

Time sessions considerately. If expecting people to travel, start when they can use bus passes, allow them to carry out caring commitments, and make sure there's parking nearby. Don't expect people to travel at peak times.

Use a range of materials, locations and devices so you can offer people choices to suit their needs. Try varying written, audio or video materials.

Talk about what will make sessions work for them. For example, how long are they comfortable sitting for or how easy is it for them to hold small things. Think about physical environment. Keep background noise low and have good lighting. Offer seating options like chairs with arms and wider seats. Make sure there are accessible toilets close by.

Keep written notes that the person can take away and practice with. Keep design clear and simple. Use plain fonts like Arial in at least 14 point size. Black text on a white background is a good place to start. Don't use italics or underlining as this can be harder to read.

Use closed captions for video sessions and face the screen for clear lip reading.

Remember: All aspects of support must be accessible, whether it's the language you use, physical venues, online presentation, or how sessions fit in with people's lives. The best way to get accessibility right is always to ask people what they need.

Getting up and running

Make it social: for many older people the social aspect of learning is the reason they come. Keep tea and biscuits on hand!

Start with the basics, like turning on and off, charging, using a touch screen, and how to connect to the internet.

Identify what individuals require at the start. Tablets are a great choice for many older people and are generally easier to use than laptops and desktop computers. Some might prefer voice-activated systems like Alexa. Others may already have a smartphone they want to learn how to use. You can use screen readers or stands, props or handles to make them easier or more comfortable to use.

Show participants how to check their device is connected to a secure connection and what to do if they are unsure.

Make sure broadband for training is fast and reliable, and minimise technical glitches.

Keep screens simple, uncluttered and personalised. Show only the apps and icons that the person will use, for example Zoom, email and an internet browser. You can also enlarge onscreen apps buttons and fonts in settings.

Loan people devices or equipment if you can, so they can practise at home or try before they buy.

Remember: Start with the basics and make sure each individual has the equipment that works for them. Make it clear that there are no silly questions and there is no failure.

Supporting people to learn

Offer one-to-one support as far as possible. Have the same person supporting the same individual wherever you can, respect the wishes and needs of each individual and accept the limit of what they are comfortable with.

Keep things simple and consistent: too many new ideas or apps could be confusing. For example, just use one video-calling service and stick with that.

If you are providing sessions:

- Keep sessions short and informal, around 30 minutes.

- Take it slow and steady. Patience is the most important quality for supporting the oldest learners well.

- Use simple language and avoid jargon. For example, talk about 'listening to music' not 'streaming'.

- Focus on building confidence through specific tasks. Completing a task that matters to them – such as checking sports results – will give a real sense of achievement.

- Repeat ideas and activities over several sessions to help people understand and remember. This will help increase confidence.

- Avoid formal tests or assessments.

- Once someone is comfortable, go on to more complex tasks such as ordering repeat prescriptions online.

Remember: Allow people to learn at their own pace and in a place where they feel comfortable, so they enjoy learning and gain confidence.

Keeping people digital

Take time to build trust and use clear communication to increase learners' confidence so that they can start using digital independently.

Encourage people to use digital every day so they practise their skills.

Make sure they understand passwords and how to log in and out on their own. Let them know where they can get help if they get stuck.

Provide support around safety, scams and fraud through a point of contact, or link to organisations. Explain that we all share the same worries and help and support is available if they are worried.

Have simple step-by-step written guidance that people can refer to.

Treat getting people digital as a process. Give continued support and try fix issues as they come up. Once people feel they can do more on their own, keep up light-touch support like a phone number to call to check something they've forgotten.

Consider mentoring options like support from volunteers, family members or carers. You can also train digital champions or link with trusted services like libraries. 'Reverse mentoring' (young people teaching older people), or peer mentoring (older people helping each other) are also good ways of keeping practice going.

Remember: Trust grows with every positive experience: focus on encouragement rather than training. One bad experience might put people off altogether.

Case studies

Digital Buddies in Salford links trained younger volunteers with older people for remote one-to-one support – and a general chat.

> 66 Katie was so patient and explained everything carefully and very well. In fact she was a real joy to talk to. I really couldn't have set my phone up without her."
>
> Linda, 75

TechMates in Wigan provides basic one-to-one support by phone, video call or in person.

> 66 It was more like being helped by a friend, rather than trying to explain what I wanted to learn with a stranger. It made me feel so relaxed when we were talking about the things I needed to know about my iPad."
>
> Sue, over 75

Heywood, Middleton & Rochdale Circle Digital Support Service offers individual or group sessions at people's home or in public settings such as a supermarket café or local medical centre. They also run an equipment library.

> 66 Thanks to the Digital Support Service I've managed to save myself a few hundred pounds off my yearly car insurance."
>
> Seetharam, 77

Where to find more help

Inspired to get going? There's a lot more information available online. Good Things Foundation has created a webpage to point you to organisations offering free resources and step-by-step guides.

Good Things Foundation is a leading digital inclusion charity working in the UK, Australia, and beyond. We want to fix the digital divide - for good - to help people thrive in a digital world. We do this through running the National Databank and the National Device Bank, as well as our National Digital Inclusion Network that helps people overcome barriers and find support to use digital.

This guide was produced with the Greater Manchester Ageing Hub in response to the Mayor of Greater Manchester's commitment to support over 75s to participate digitally. You can find out more about the support available across Greater Manchester to support residents to get online here: www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/digital/digital-inclusion-agenda/local-authority-digital-inclusion-support

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