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prevention education protection

Better Together

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Issue - 10

Out of sight

Out of mind

Managing Online Social Interactions

Now that the back-to-school dust is settling and the challenges of getting new uniforms, new shoes, and stationery is hopefully a distant memory. Let's turn our attention to the ever-present challenge of finding the balance between the benefits and risks of allowing our children to be online. It is our responsibility, as parents, to give our children/ teenagers guidance on how to be safe online. Here are some useful tips to consider: As your child develops cognitively this will no doubt include the increasing challenges of keeping them safe online. It is our responsibility, as parents, to guide our children/teenagers on how to be safe online. Here are some useful tips to consider:

Primary School

Throughout your child's educational journey, they will inevitably have lots of 'digital-first' experiences, especially when they start primary school.

Watching video sharing platforms
According to OFCOM research watching video sharing platforms is still the most popular online activity for 3-11 year olds; over 90% enjoy doing this.

Unlike YouTube Kids, many platforms require users to be aged 13 or older to limit the likelihood of exposure to harmful content. Making use of the parental controls and privacy settings on your child(ren)'s devices/accounts is a proactive approach to help ensure their safety online. As children get older they may challenge the settings that have been implemented; this could be a great opportunity parents for to explain that the ultimate aim is to keep them safe, not to control what they do online.

A simple message that you could share with your child at this early age is 'Don't believe everything you see or hear online". Versions of this message will no doubt become more specific and nuanced as your child(ren) increase their use of video sharing platforms.

Sending messages / Making voice or video calls
The next most popular activity for primary school aged children is sending messages or making voice or video calls. 59% of 5-7 year olds do this with the help of an adult and by the time they are aged 8-11, over 80% are engaged with these activities; the most popular platforms for this age group are WhatsApp (29%) and FaceTime (23%).

Sometimes the difficulty in sticking to the 13 years old age restrictions, is knowing what alternative age-appropriate apps / platforms exist. So, here are a couple of child-friendly apps, that you may not have heard of, for you to consider:
• Grom Social (Android, 4+)
• PlayKids - Cartoons and Games (Apple, 4+)

Unfortunately, as no app/platform/site is unequivocally completely free of harmful content, parents will still need to start discussing online dangers in an age-appropriate way.

Using social media
The percentage of children engaging with social media more than doubles for 8-11 year olds (63%) in comparison to 5-7 year olds (30%). As

well as developing cognitively, children in this age group are also developing thier skills in media; this makes them particularly susceptible to online grooming. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reported, earlier this year, a staggering 1,058% increase since 2019 in the number of web pages displaying sexual abuse images and videos of children aged 7-10, who have been recorded via internet-connected devices, often by online predators.

As well as proactively supervising, setting parental controls and putting clear boundaries in place, it would also be beneficial for parents to include a rule for their child to tell them if something doesn't feel right. Teaching children critical thinking and encouraging open communication about their online experiences are essential steps to help them recognise risky situations.

Transitioning to Secondary School

By the time children are in secondary school, their natural desire for social independence is demonstrated by the number of children who:
• Send messages or make voice or video calls (98%),
• Watch any video sharing platforms (98%), and/or
• Use social media apps or sites (93%)

Let's look at each of these in turn.

🛡 Sending messages / Making voice or video calls

Have you talked to your child about:
- [ ] Adjusting their privacy settings to private
- [ ] Avoiding sharing personal information
- [ ] The potential dangers of interacting with strangers online
- [ ] Only meeting online strangers with your permission / supervision
- [ ] Thinking twice before sharing photos or sensitive information
- [ ] Treating others with respect online
- [ ] Recognising cyberbullying and reporting it
- [ ] Creating and protecting strong passwords
- [ ] Verifying suspicious messages using alternative means of communication (e.g. a phone call)
- [ ] Avoiding sending personal information using public WiFi
- [ ] How to block and report users
- [ ] Setting their own boundaries and respecting the boundaries of others online
- [ ] Critical thinking so they know information contained in the message can be misleading or false

🛡 Watching video sharing platforms

Have you had discussions to raise awareness of:
- [ ] The importance of watching age-appropriate content
- [ ] How videos can be edited / manipulated to present a false narrative
- [ ] Who can view, comment on, and share their videos based on the settings
- [ ] How to block or report users engaging in inappropriate behaviour
- [ ] The risks associated with interacting with strangers online
- [ ] How to seek help if they encounter cyberbullying
- [ ] Using the settings to allow/disallow comments to be added
- [ ] Balancing screen time with other activities
- [ ] The difference between regular content and paid

promotions (ads)
- [ ] The mental health impact of watching emotionally intense content
- [ ] Verify information before believing or sharing it online, especially if AI generated
- [ ] Respecting others' privacy and always ask for consent.

By teaching your teenager these important principles and fostering an environment of trust and communication, you can help them navigate video sharing platforms safely and make informed decisions about the content they consume.

🛡 Using social media

Have you communicated with your child about:
- [ ] It being safer to keep interactions limited to people they know in real life
- [ ] Only accepting friend requests from people they know in real life
- [ ] Not moving conversations from the open forum of a social media platforms to having private conversations within the app or on separate messaging apps
- [ ] Setting their profiles to private to limit who can see their posts
- [ ] Thinking before they post anything publicly or in a private group
- [ ] Being cautious about sharing personal photos, videos, or sensitive information about themselves, and others
- [ ] The potential consequences of oversharing and
- [ ] How their content can be easily copied or shared without their consent
- [ ] Their digital footprint which could have an impact on their academic and professional opportunities in the future
- [ ] Treating others online as they would in person
- [ ] Reporting cyberbullying and letting them know they can come to you if they are being targeted
- [ ] The importance of being authentic online to build genuine connections and relationships
- [ ] The importance of taking breaks from social media to minimise the likelihood of stress and anxiety
- [ ] The benefits of engaging in offline activities
- [ ] Managing their time on social media
- [ ] Communicating respectfully online, even when discussing differing opinions
- [ ] Recognising fake news and verifying information from reliable sources before sharing or reacting to it

Aspire to have open communication about their online activities. Let your teenager know that you will occasionally checking their social media accounts not to invade their privacy, but to ensure their safety.

Remember, our role as parents is to equip our children with the knowledge and tools they need to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly. Fostering open, consistent conversations built on trust is key to providing guidance that is more likely to be taken onboard. This may help them to make informed decisions while online.

Finally, lead by example. Demonstrate responsible online behaviour and social media use to your child(ren) by modelling the behaviour you want them to follow. Your choices can inadvertently influence how your teenager interacts with people and content online. They are more likely to adopt healthy habits if they see you practicing them.

Unless otherwise stated all the statistics come from:
Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes, 29 March 2023