

Parent sessions

Aims

- To consider what children and young people are really doing online as opposed to what they might say that they are doing.
- To explore some of the risks and benefits of using the internet and online communications.
- To provide some possible solutions.

This is about education, **not simply blocking and banning** children from the internet. Blocking worked a few years ago, but now young people all have mobile devices which allow them to access the internet wherever and whenever they want to and so they need to know how to protect themselves when things go wrong. Of course there is a place for some blocking – as parents we are confident and comfortable in doing this for the offline aspects of our children’s lives, we should also feel confident to do this with the online aspects too. It is clearly inappropriate for children to access adult content/pornography and we can take steps to block this as parents. More information can be found at www.internetmatters.org

esafety covers a wide range of issues from inappropriate content to cyberbullying, paedophiles, identity theft and validity and bias.

		Content: Child as recipient	Contact: Child as participant	Conduct: Child as actor
OPPORTUNITIES	Education learning and digital literacy	Educational resources	Contact with others who share one’s interests	Self-initiated or collaborative learning
	Participation and civic engagement	Global information	Exchange among interest groups	Concrete forms of civic engagement
	Creativity and self-expression	Diversity of resources	Being invited/inspired to create or participate	User-generated content creation
	Identity and social connection	Advice (personal/health/sexual etc)	Social networking, shared experiences with others	Expression of identity
RISKS	Commercial	Advertising, spam, sponsorship	Tracking, harvesting personal information	Gambling, illegal downloads, hacking
	Aggressive	Violent / gruesome / hateful content	Being bullied, harassed or stalked	Bullying or harassing another
	Sexual	Pornographic / harmful sexual content	Meeting strangers, being groomed	Creating / uploading pornographic material
	Values	Racist, biased info / advice (e.g., drugs)	Self-harm, unwelcome persuasion	Providing advice e.g., suicide / pro-anorexia

A classification of online opportunities and risks for children and young people¹

At first sight, the list of risks can seem quite daunting, but closer examination reveals that many of the risks cited are concerns that have existed for generations. For example tracking is mentioned and of course this is a concern, we also talk about stalking which is something that happens in the off-line world as well. Unfortunately, pornographic and harmful sexual content has always existed; the internet simply provides an easier means of accessing this material as the perceived anonymity it affords mean that children and young people are much more likely to take risks and attempt to access such material believing that they will never be discovered.

Despite the fact that many of these risks have always existed, the internet brings with it a couple of issues which mean that children and young people can be particularly vulnerable.

1. Children and young people tend to use the internet (at least initially) in places where they feel very safe. This is because we tell them that they are safe and want them to feel that way. Home and school are places that we need children to feel safe and secure in and staff and parents work hard to ensure that this is the case. However, in doing so, we encourage children to approach their use of the internet with a false sense of security. In their eyes, nothing can go wrong – because they are in that safe place. This is highlighted by the comment below:
“How can we come to any harm when we are sitting at home, nothing really bad can happen.” – Girl 15,²
2. We know from scientific research, that children’s capacity to understand risk develops after adolescence because the parts of the brain that govern risk are not fully functioning until this time . This means that children don’t have the same appreciation of risk as adults – this is actually a good thing in some respects as without this, children and young people would not take the risk to tell their first lie of consequence, or do their first noble thing. Indeed, it is only their inability to appreciate and understand risk that allows them to do those things that we as adults consider to be both incredibly brave and foolish, the things that really characterise adolescence, the series of really dangerous decisions that you have to make to become an adult.

These two factors taken together can form a potentially toxic mix, meaning that some children and young people will take real risks without any thought for future consequences.

¹ Livingstone, S and Haddon, L (2009) *EU Kids Online: Final report*. LSE, London: EU Kids Online. (EC Safer Internet Plus Programme Deliverable D6.5)

² From Ofcom – Social Networking: A quantitative and qualitative research report into attitudes, behaviours and use (April 2008)

It is important to remember at this point that we were all children once, we all did the foolish things, the difference – and it is a crucially important one – is that our foolish activities were not permanently recorded.

Consequently, informing children about risk involves

- Frequent reinforcement – which means both at home and at school
- Providing children with examples – things from their real life that actually mean something to them.

We must infuse children with the media literacy that helps them to understand about the immortality of the information that they put up online. This is vitally important. The way to do this is NOT to say don't use this, but to say for example, "look at how this rumour flooded through the network". Encourage children and young people to carry out the experiment for themselves. When they have witnessed the speed and diffusion of how something goes through a social network they will be much more likely to think twice about what they post. There are many examples in the media which we can use to initiate discussions with our children – they will have an opinion and are more likely to consider some of the issues if we share some of these stories with them and ask them what they think. (Two examples can be found below).

Paris Brown: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-22083032> and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/9982146/Paris-Brown-Youth-police-commissioner-warns-of-dangers-of-social-networks-as-she-resigns-over-racist-tweets.html>

Tom Daley: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-19059127>

How can we best protect children and young people?

The most effective way to keep children and young people safe online is to ensure that they have someone that they trust who they can talk to if something goes wrong.

Education and empowerment are much more powerful tools than blocking, banning and monitoring. We spend a lot of time telling children and young people how important their privacy is and what they must do in order to protect it. We do this for a number of good reasons; one is that there is a small risk that they could be groomed by a predator, but more importantly, because the internet will never forget. It is appropriate then that we sit down with our children and point out that the photo they post when they are 15 or 16 of them half dressed, smoking a cigarette and drinking will indeed come back and haunt them when they are 35 or 36 and they will wish they had never posted it. However, at the same time as telling them this, we also put our children in situations where everything that they do at school and at home is being watched, monitored and processed. The information that is

gathered is then used as ammunition for us to tell our children that they have done something wrong – they have been caught.

Children understand that actions speak louder than words – so when we monitor a child for every second that they are online, and then turn around to them and say that privacy is important and they must protect it, they understand that we're not really serious about this. When we tell them to protect their personal information and not give it out, but also that if they take steps to hide that information from us (e.g. by using a proxy server and so by-passing the school's "safe" internet connection which will probably be filtered), then they will be in a world of trouble, children and young people then understand that we're not really serious about this whole not disclosing information business. We are training children not to value their privacy by relying too heavily on monitoring software and surveillance in schools. If we really want to keep children safe on the internet, we need to start equipping them with the tools to understand when they're being monitored. Children are infinitely resourceful, monitoring and filtering will not always stop them from accessing what they want to access, but it **could** stop them from working with us to become better online citizens.

Useful websites:

www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents

www.childnet.com/kia/parents

<http://parents.vodafone.com>

www.saferinternet.org.uk

www.internetmatters.org

www.connectsafely.org

www.common sense media.org

www.net-aware.org.uk