E-Safety: a parent's perspective

"Keeping the PC in a communal area"

It's one piece of advice you used to hear a long time ago, but things have moved on considerably since then. We're increasingly mobile and use multiple devices for different reasons including work, play and education. As a rule, it's outdated, but as an option it can still be good advice, especially for a child that is exhibiting high -risk behaviour.

That's probably the most important point in this article; all children are different, and we all parent in different ways, which adds up to the fact that advice for one parent may be entirely different with another parent. Loosely this is based on aspects such as:

Age, maturity experience, level of parental trust, comfort levels of parents (in their own use of technology), additional needs of the child such as learning difficulties and much more.

It can seem like a minefield sometimes, online can be a 'scary' place; no-one would deny that there are some very serious and tragic incidents, but in my own experience as a parent and someone who has spoken to thousands of children and young people about these issues over many years, the majority of young people and children do know a lot, principally due to good parenting and good education in school.

It is however the natural curiosity and risk-taking within children that may lead them to areas that we parents would not be happy with. Equally, the behaviour of others towards our children may give us considerable cause for concern.

Personally, I work to two simple principles (in the context of this article):

• Technology, for the most part, is neutral

• Behaviour is key

However, the use of some technology such as *devices, apps, websites etc.* can result in a behavioural concern. For example, the use of the hugely popular app, Snapchat. This app has a function whereby an image can be taken and shared, but which then disappears after a set number of seconds. This has led to some people thinking they can get away with taking and sharing inappropriate photos that would give parents considerable cause for concern.

Whether I'm working with children, young people, their parents or their teachers, I work to a concept called **Safe**, **Smart** and **Social**. This allows for simplicity and clarity.

(Note: the ages examples below are an indicator of age groups rather than specific ages. Equally the explanations are simplified for brevity.)

Safe

This is for children up to approximately 6 years old. At this early age, children will have little understanding of risk and mitigation in a complex online world. Given a real world example: when we take them swimming there's a lifeguard in the pool, we might get in the pool with them, or they've got armbands on. In other words, we mitigate their risk-taking as much as we possibly can. We are teaching them the very basics and having fun at the same time. I'm not comparing swimming with some of the very serious risks that children can be exposed to online, it's a simple analogy; for young children we need to be there with them, in the real world and online, having fun and exploring in a safe and managed environment. But we also know that at some point those armbands need to come off, and this brings us to the next principle.

Smart

Children aged between 7 and 11 will start to become more knowledgeable and adventurous both online and offline; they're looking for more opportunities such as hobbies, games, YouTube etc. but also for education both in school and at home. As they explore there are further risks. This isn't necessarily a bad thing as it is part of building resilience. Whilst in the real world we would call this becoming streetwise, it's similar online, however technology allows exposure to some concerning areas, specifically related to content, contact and conduct, that children wouldn't ordinarily see in the real world.

At this age range it simply isn't practical to physically watch our children 24/7, as much as we would like to, in order to protect them.

Social

The move from prep/primary school age into senior/secondary is a significant one; adolescence is just around the corner. Moving through this adolescent period is the most difficult time of all and, as parents, it's the age-range that can give us the greatest challenges.

We've all been there: those ever-changing emotions and feelings, high risk-taking (inadvertently or on purpose), finding our identities e.g. socially or sexually and so much more. This period of life is often the most complex of all. Add in further complexity of online content, contact and conduct and the word 'challenging' may be an understatement for some.

So, all that said, what are the options available to us?

Technical Options

These should be seen as 'assistive' technology, commonly called parental controls; in other words, we can't watch our children 24/7 so we can use things like:

Internet content filters

These are filters that allow or deny certain content, for example adult websites, social media or lifestyle websites (such as pro-anorexia) etc. Most internet service providers provide households with free access to filters. Some parents don't like the lack of flexibility of these types of filters, principally as they can restrict access to all the devices in the household.

In that case they can adopt filters that are 'per device' filters such as Windows Family Safety and those on Apple Mac computers. Equally, there is an increasing range of technology available to us such as cross-platform parental controls. Some are free with additional paid-for features e.g. Qustodio www.qustodio.com

Parental controls on gaming stations

Many gaming stations come with easy-to-use parental controls that can be highly flexible, allowing you to manage things such as downloading age-appropriate games. Other devices, e.g. tablets, mobile phones and online services come with a degree of parental control which again allow you to manage aspects such as content.

Parental help

If this is all too overwhelming, there is a fantastic website called – www.internetmatters.org - It has clear, simple information to give you the options on what's available and, importantly, guides to setting them up.

I would advise it is important to set these up with your children. This allows for a conversation as to why you're doing it; that you're not spying on them or spoiling their access, but that you're protecting them from content that is inappropriate. Let them know however that they can always talk to you if there is a particular site/service that they need access to.
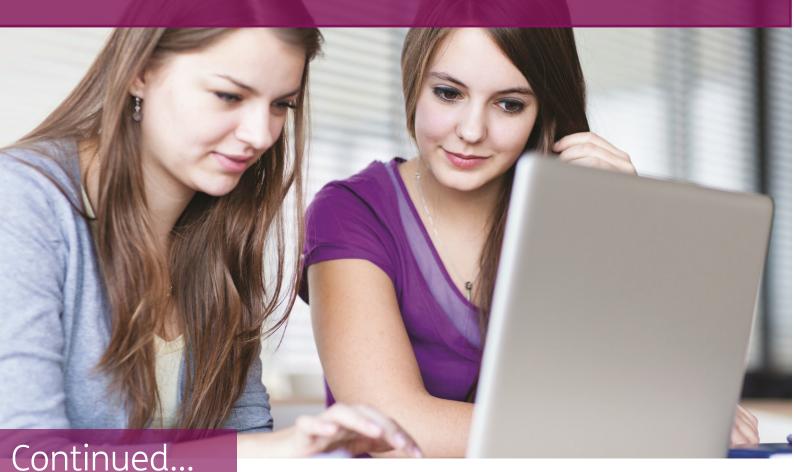
Keep Up to Date

It's a good idea to find out from school what education your children get in regards to staying safe online. It's good to have an understanding of what your children already do or don't know.

You can use this information to brush up on your own skills if there are areas you're unfamiliar with, which in turn means you can mirror what the children are being taught in school.

For example, younger children are taught if they see something on a screen which concerns them they should turn the screen off (or put the lid down) and tell the teacher. This does 3 things: it gives the child a very simple strategy to work to; it allows a conversation in regards to the content; it allows a check to be made on the filter to ensure it's working correctly.

Continued...

Apps and Games

Keep up to date with the latest apps and games that children and young people are using. It's impossible to keep up to date with everything, but find out what your children are using and take a look for yourself, maybe even have a go yourself? For example, if your children are using apps such as Instagram or Musical.ly find out why these are so popular, take a look at the privacy settings that are available and also check whether they're age appropriate. Many apps allow for a bio, or profile. Make sure you're happy with the information that is being used in the profile such as the image, personal details etc.

Useful parents' website

An excellent website that gives really useful information from a parental perspective is www.commonsensemedia.org. This site reviews newer games, apps, TV shows etc. and gives advice and opinion.

If you want to have a look at these games/apps being used, but don't want to use or install them, your one-stop-shop is YouTube. On the subject of YouTube, you may have concerns about some of the content on this hugely popular service. YouTube Kids could be your saviour for younger children; it's free, multi-platform and requires no sign-up -
https://kids.youtube.com/

Curiosity, Support and Guidance

Devices and being online is no longer a bespoke part of our children's lives, it's just life.

We need to be curious about what our children and young people are doing online. Not investigative curiosity or spying (unless you have a specific concern), but just natural parental curiosity in exactly the same way as we would talk to children about their real-world activities, for example what they're doing, where they're going and who they're talking to.

As children get older they will become more private about what they're doing and won't always talk to parents. We need to support and guide them in a non-judgemental way, understanding that they will take risks as a natural part of the growing up process, but letting them know we're there for them. Easier said than done, I know!

Finally, there is a lot of fantastic information and guidance online in regards to specific risks and issues. I would advise using sites such as NSPCC -
https://www.nspcc.org.uk/

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