

Online Safety Alerts – Think Before You Scare!

The Education Safeguarding Advisor (Online Protection) within the Education Safeguarding Service regularly receives queries from schools in relation to warning parents/carers and young people about the online safeguarding risks they have heard about via the media.

Whilst sharing warning about specific risks, apps or trends is often done with good intentions; it can pose risks. Sharing content, either electronically or otherwise, that is unverified or unrealistic can unintentionally have harmful consequences: www.thatsnonsense.com/internet-rumors-why-you-should-never-share-false-rumors/. Although some stories and warnings circulating online may be based on facts, many have been found to be hoaxes, “fake news” or are sensationalised. We are encouraging all educational settings and professionals to think before they **share** with their communities.

Safe

Children are naturally inclined to take risks as part of normal childhood development; by identifying a specific app or risk, we may encourage children to explore something that previously they had not been aware of, either out of curiosity, or because they are under the impression everyone else is using it (aka FOMO or “fear of missing out”).

If children, or indeed adults, are exposed to content that highlights potentially harmful material, even when meant as a warning, it may cause significant distress. This can be seen by an increase in reports to Childline following the 2017 “Killer Clown” craze. The publicity that arises from fake news can also lead to copycat activity amongst vulnerable young people. When dangerous behaviours they were previously unaware of are brought to young people’s attention it may place them at risk of significant risk of harm, either to themselves or others.

Whilst some children may feel confident to report concerns to staff following media reports, other children may use school equipment to research further information for themselves. School should re-evaluate (and in some cases alter) their filtering and monitoring approaches following high profile media stories. Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) should consider monitoring the behaviour of pupils who they feel may be particularly affected or placed at risk.

Helpful

There will always be risks posed to children, both on and offline. Whilst some concerns will be based on facts, they always need to be put into context. **Any** online app, website or game which allows communication or the creation/sharing of content brings risks such as; cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate or harmful content or online sexual abuse and exploitation.

“Naming and shaming” an online tool as dangerous may encourage some adults, even with the right intentions, to focus on the app or risk rather than the underlying behaviour or vulnerability. This can lead some adults to becoming complacent and aware of potential signs and symptoms of harm or abuse. An over reliance on banning and blocking can push children onto other platforms, cause them to hide their

activity and ultimately prevent them from disclosing concerns to an adult because they are afraid their internet access will be removed.

Educational settings and professionals should consider if it is always helpful to identify a specific app or risk when talking with children and young people or parents/carers.

- If there has not been a specific incident that directly involves member of the community, then we must be clear on what we hope to achieve by sharing this information.
 - If the intention is to warn parents/carers, then schools will end up in a never ending battle and are unlikely to be able to keep up due to how quickly technology develops! A focus on general online safety risks and useful tools to enable parents/carers to have appropriate discussions with their children is likely to be more successful at safeguarding in the long term.
- If settings do decide to identify specific apps or websites (following a specific incident) then they should ensure that the content they share is factual and provides practical advice about responsible use and safety features. Avoid using any personal opinions or judgements, as this can undermine the core messages and in some cases have a detrimental impact on working relationships.

If Kent schools or settings are in doubt about whether to name an app or site, they can seek advice from the Education Safeguarding Advisor (Online Protection) or the Online Safety Development Officer within the Education Safeguarding Service.

Template letters can be found on the blog: www.theeducationpeople.org/blog/?tags=Letter&page=1

Letters relating to specific issues (such as cyberbullying or underage use of social networking) or services are available from the Education Safeguarding Service upon request.

Appropriate

Unverified warnings and hoaxes are not new issues. “Urban legends” have been spread via word of mouth for many years; however, the use of social media has significantly increased the scale and reach of such stories. Even in cases where warnings are shared through traditional routes, such as via letters, they can still be photographed and shared online. This can be a serious concern if warnings contain names or details that could compromise criminal investigations; specific information should **not** be shared, unless advice has been sought from the Police and/or Education Safeguarding Service.

Reliable

Sharing information or safety messages that are untrue or unfounded can significantly damage our credibility in the eyes of young people. Even when information comes from websites or organisations considered to be trustworthy, they may unknowingly be sharing hoaxes or “fake news”. It is therefore crucial that we are all critical consumers and do not always accept or believe everything we read online.

It’s a good idea for professionals to check such stories out with a known reliable and trustworthy source; this may include organisations such as the [Professional Online Safety Helpline](#), [NSPCC](#), [Samaritans](#), [CEOP](#), [Childnet](#) and the [UK Safer Internet Centre](#).

Discussions relating to fake news can also provide schools with valuable teaching opportunities to develop children's media literacy skills. Schools can use media reports to explore sensitive issues in a carefully managed and age appropriate way without placing children at risk or identifying specific behaviours.

Useful websites that can help determine if an online story is true, as well as curriculum resources can be found at: www.kelsi.org.uk/child-protection-and-safeguarding/e-safety/e-safety-classroom-materials

Educational

Highlighting a frightening story may raise awareness in the short term, but it rarely has a lasting impact or results in long term behavioural change. Schools should provide sensible and practical advice to children as well as parents/carers and staff. Children should be aware of their personal safety and know how to report concerns, such as telling a trusted adult, reporting to the website/app or accessing appropriate support such from CEOP, the IWF and ChildLine. We should continue to have open and positive conversations with young people about the online world, so that they feel safe and confident to talk to us.

Some of the most important messages about keeping safe online, which apply to all websites, games and apps, that can be shared with children as well as parent/carers are:

- Be aware of age restrictions and why they are in place
- Use privacy settings and be aware that when things are posted online, they can always be copied and shared
- Block and report users or posts that are worrying or upsetting to the website/app involved
- If you are worried or upset by something you see or experience online, then talk to a trusted adult

Educational settings and professionals should encourage parents to discuss online safety at home and to talk to their child about what they do online. Useful websites to signpost parents/carers to include:

- www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents
- www.childnet.com
- www.saferinternet.org.uk
- www.parentinfo.org
- www.internetmatters.org
- www.nspcc.org.uk/onlinesafety

Additional sources of support for young people experiencing mental health difficulties are:

- www.youngminds.org.uk
- www.papyrus-uk.org
- www.samaritans.org

All adults should celebrate the exciting things, both on and offline, and provide sensible advice and assistance if children are taking risks. If educational settings have specific concerns relating to the safety and wellbeing of any members of their community, they should always follow the appropriate safeguarding procedures.

Online dangers will always exist, much like in the real world. Partnership working and empowering adults as well as children and young people how to manage and mitigate risk is essential.