

Keeping Children Safe Online

Focus: Social Media Apps

We are now living in an age where the World Wide Web and access to unlimited information is at our fingertips. Increasingly children of all ages are using the internet for a variety of different reasons including:

- Searching for information online via search engines;
- Watching and sharing videos;
- Using social networking sites to connect with and make new friends;
- Writing or replying to questions in forums or message boards;
- Playing games online;
- Chatting with others through gaming websites, messenger apps, webcams or social network sites.

Using social networking sites, in one kind or another, is second-nature to most children and when used correctly they are a great way for people to keep in touch with family and friends, as well as learn new things and discover new places. New sites are created every day and although there are far too many to mention, parents, professionals and those working with children and young people (CYP) need be aware of the potential dangers posed to CYP who are accessing these sites and apps.

All professionals who work with children and young people should have an awareness of the variety of e-communication and the different online platforms children use to communicate. In order to ensure they can offer basic safeguarding advice to children in this context, it is important for professionals to try to keep up to date of the new apps which are being used and the abbreviations CYP are using. It is not sufficient for professionals, who may not themselves use the variety of networks or models of communication, to have no interest themselves within this context.

Professionals do not need to know the ins and outs of all the apps, sites, and terms that are popular at the time. However it is vital for those working with children and young people to know the basics - what they are, why they're popular, and what the potential risks are when these apps are not used responsibly. Having a basic understanding can make a huge difference between a positive and a negative experience for CYP.

What are apps and how are they used?

“App” is short for Application, which is another name for a computer program. When we talk about apps we generally refer to programs which are downloaded and run on mobile or tablet devices (they can also be downloaded to smartphones and tablet computers). Apps are purchased from an online store, some are free and some you must pay for, payment is either via credit or debit card; however you can also purchase gift cards from normal shops and redeem the voucher.

The range of apps available to CYP is endless: educational resources which help with school homework; online gaming; social media platforms as well as; creating, uploading and sharing videos.

Some Popular Apps Children and Young People are Using



Facebook is a social network, which lets you create a page about yourself. You can add friends, share pictures and videos, write on people’s pages, send instant messages and join online groups. Facebook also has a private messenger sister site which can be separately downloaded.



Kik is an instant messaging app. It lets you create your own username and message others without using your mobile number. You can share photos, organise events, share games, news and anything of interest to you from the internet.



PopJam is a creative website for children and young people. You can share drawings, photos and audio messages with friends and other people.



FMyLife is an online community where you can post a short caption about an unfortunate incident that has happened during your day. The caption usually starts with “today...” and ends with “FML”. You can also comment on other people’s stories.



Instagram

Instagram is a picture and video sharing app. Users can post content and use hashtags to share experiences, thoughts or memories with an online community. You can follow your friends, family, celebrities and even companies on Instagram.



Snapchat

Snapchat is a popular photo sharing app, that lets users share their photos for a few seconds before they 'disappear'. But anyone receiving a pic can keep it by taking a screen shot, or using one of the new apps have been developed which enable the picture to be retained without doing that. The age limit to join the site is 13, but many children do so much younger.



Ask.fm

On Ask.fm, anonymous users ask other users questions. This means that they can easily hide their identity and effectively, say what they like without any consequences. Bullying and abuse on the site can lead to very traumatic experiences amongst youngsters, in some cases tragically taking their own lives.



Yik Yak

"No profiles, no passwords, it's all anonymous", says the app's publicity. Designed as a means of posting news and messages in local communities and on college and school campuses.



Habbo

Habbo (full name Habbo Hotel) - is a social networking site aimed at teenagers, although children younger are able to access it.



Shots of Me (or just Shots)

An app that enables users to take and post selfies, hence using only the front-view camera of their mobile phone.



Omegle's strapline is "Chat to strangers". Omegle is a social networking site that randomly connects you to another person who's on the site. It lets you talk to them in a one-to-one audio or video conversation. You can both appear as anonymous, unless you decide to share your personal information.

A full list of apps, the age limits, information on what they do can be found via the NSPCC website. The NSPCC joined forces with O2 to help parents explore and understand online life as kids know it. (www.net-aware.org.uk)

Risks

For CYP their online presence and world is as important, for some more so, than their day to day life and reality. Mobile devices and tablets are a key part in children's lives and children of all ages are accessing online games and social media sites and messenger apps. Almost all mobile devices now have access to the internet and when used responsibly the internet can be and is a place of great excitement and wonder. However there are potential dangers and risks to CYP using these apps for example:

- Connecting and talking with people they think are new 'friends', but who could actually intend to do them harm;
- Sharing or viewing inappropriate or adult images, videos or conversations;
- Being bullied or subject to other kinds of abuse, this also includes revenge porn, sexting, posting sexual images or conversations online;
- Taking part in or encouraging others to carry out dangerous or irresponsible acts / dares on camera;
- Revealing personal or private information about themselves, friends or family;
- Arranging to meet someone for the first time, whom they have met online and not understanding the potential dangers of this.

Professionals should also remember that children and young people could also be bullying or saying inappropriate things about somebody else, rather than being the target. In this case it is important to recognise the child as a victim as opposed to a perpetrator. Professionals must always be asking the questions:

- "Why is this young person behaving in this way?"
- "What are the potential risks to this child?"
- "What has happened in this child's life for them to be behaving in this manner?"
- "What support can I offer this child or young person?"

How to Talk to Children and Young People about Keeping Themselves Safe

Professionals need to understand the environment and context of a child's life and why they are doing what they are doing. Internet sites and apps are not separate to this. Children go online to make new friends, to explore games, to learn, but they also like to be liked and this can increase their vulnerabilities. No app or site is created to intentionally harm a child or a young person, and

many sites, including social networking sites, have a lower age limit for membership (13 years old is commonplace), but it's easy for children to get around it and get online at an earlier age. Some sites glorify sexism and criminalisation (especially in the online gaming world) which can create a false imagery of what the world is really like. Some allow the posting of messages and questions anonymously which can lead to abuse. Others allow the access and sharing of inappropriate and/or sexual images and videos without properly verifying age limits. Although this is the reality there are many ways to encourage proper and safe, responsible use of apps and sites.

There are different ways in which we are able to teach and educate CYP to keep safe online by explaining:

- To be careful who they befriend and talk to online, not to trust strangers immediately (this is no different to the real world);
- Not to reveal personal details such as their birth date, address, pet's name or teacher as this could give another person all the information they require to harm them;
- Not to click on links or download from sites they have linked to, this may lead to hacking of their accounts or access to their webcam without their knowledge;
- To log out of accounts once you have stopped using them as this will reduce others from accessing their account and taking advantage of it.

Digital Footprint: explain to the CYP about their digital footprint and how this can put them at risk to harm. If a CYP posts on a public page their location, what they are doing, who they are with, this creates a digital footprint for perpetrators to target them and find out their hobbies, patterns and locations very easily. Encourage CYP to turn off their location setting on their phones and be aware that by posting personal information and your location this may make them vulnerable to potential harm. For professionals, understanding the apps CYP are using and the risks associated with them, and how activity is reflected in the child's Digital Footprint is vital, therefore professionals need to engage with this and not ignore social media. Understanding the context of a child's digital footprint is key to reducing risks.

Sexting: explain to CYP the dangers and risks of Sexting and how this can affect their life and the life of others around them. ([tri.x Briefing #185: Sexting](#)) If a CYP shares an image with their boyfriend or girlfriend and it is then shared on to others it can often lead to bullying, manipulation, harassment and/or bribery. If a CYP discloses that this has happened to them or they have received an image or inappropriate message the last thing they need to hear is that it is a criminal offence. Explain the dangers of sending images and where that could lead to.

Where young people are voluntarily sending/sharing sexual images or content with one another the police may use the recently introduced 'outcome 21' recording code to record that a crime has been committed but that it is not considered to be in the public interest to take criminal action against the people involved. This reduces stigma and distress for children and help to minimise the long term impact of the situation. ([http://www.college.police.uk/News/College-news/Documents/Police action in response to sexting - briefing \(003\).pdf](http://www.college.police.uk/News/College-news/Documents/Police%20action%20in%20response%20to%20sexting%20-%20briefing%20(003).pdf))

Services should be delivered within the context of the child's life, by understanding the effects and impact of abuse is pivotal in providing the right support, by the right agency and at the right time. Professionals should be aware of where to signpost and what to do if they are concerned for a

child or young person. The underlying message to children and young people needs to be that they will be listened to, believed, they are never to blame for what has happened and help will always be given. The downloading of new apps and accessing of the “hottest new sites” will continue to be a part of CYP’s lives however, there are many apps out there which are directed solely at keeping children and young people safe. Encourage the download of these apps when engaging with young people (see resources).

Professionals also have a responsibility to engage with and educate parents about what they can do: set up parental controls on mobile and tablet devices (<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/parental-controls>); signpost parents to useful sites on how to talk to their children about keeping safe (<http://lawstuff.org.uk/online-safety/>).

Resources

Apps Which Help CYP Keep Safe



Wud U?

A free educational tool that aims to show young people the behaviours that could put them at risk of being sexually exploited, through illustrated, interactive stories.

www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/our_work/sexual_exploitation/cse-professionals/wud-u-app.htm



Freedom Charity

The App targets 3 groups.

- The first are potential victims of forced marriage, or other abuse.
- The second are the closest friends of the victim. They are in the best position to help, as they see the signs of abuse.
- The third are professionals who learn from the app how to spot signs of abuse and what can be done.

This app puts the victim just two clicks away from help.

www.freedomcharity.org.uk/resources/freedom-mobile-app



This app created by Childline helps CYP to tackle the issue of someone sending inappropriate messages or images. If someone's trying to get a CYP to send them naked images of themselves, images on Zipit can be used to keep the situation in control. It's packed with killer comebacks and top tips to help CYP stay in control.

Images from Zipit can also be shared through other apps like Whatsapp or Instagram, depending on what kind of phone the CYP has and what apps they have.

[www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/sexting/zipit-app/](http://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety sexting/zipit-app/)

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