Kids Online

One of the most frightening conversations we have had with a parent involved the disclosure, 'I totally trust my daughter (aged 12-years). She watches movies and surfs the internet in her room. I just know she will tell me if some creepy person tries to talk to her online'.

How does a 12-year-old girl recognise 'some creepy person' when they are masquerading as a fun, friendly and understanding 14-year-old boy who just wants to be friends with a pretty, friendly girl like your daughter? Someone who tells her what she wants to hear, soothes her insecurities and makes her feel beautiful and special? Someone she can trust and confide in?

Our children are digital natives and are more at risk than ever before from online grooming. Grooming by predators is not a new thing, but it is certainly more prevalent with the increase in devices in the hands of children. Many of these young people are using their devices, often unsupervised, for what is a large chunk of every day. In fact, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 reports that young people aged 15-18 years spend on average 18 hours per week online.

It is an error to think it is only unhappy, isolated and lonely children who seek company on the internet. It is also normal, happy, curious children who are exploring their world, unaware of the very real danger of coming literally face to face with someone who would harm them. Furthermore, most children are naturally trusting by nature and are usually prepared to take people they meet at face value.

We hear on the news about children as young as 12 and 13 who have been groomed and lured from their homes by predators who have harmed them. But there are other scenarios. Young people who visit social meeting sites can be similarly lured and manipulated into speaking and behaving in inappropriate and even sexually explicit ways that can be videoed and then shared on by the 'friend' at the other end of the camera. They can be persuaded to share details like Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook account details, or even phone numbers, addresses and birthdays. They don't need to leave their home, or even their own bedroom, for their emotional and physical wellbeing to be at risk. Whether they are innocent, naïve or just foolish, the end result can be the same. Devastating.

It's not all doom and gloom. The internet opens doors to a whole world of learning, culture, opportunities, friendships and activities. It is a place where we can all create and share with people all around the world. However, children and young people are at a stage of development in which risk-taking behaviours and emerging decision-making can lead to poor decisions and negative outcomes. It is vital that parents remain actively involved and vigilant regarding their children's online activities.

What can you do to protect them?

- Create an open relationship with your child where they know they can come to you for anything at all without fear of being yelled at or having their device removed. Face-to-face and heart-to-heart will help more than confronting strictness and punishments.
- Continue to communicate, educate and negotiate with children and young people about their use of technology on a regular basis.
- Be very clear with your children why it is not safe to give out personal and identifying information online. Be specific about what 'identifying information' is.

- Check in randomly with your child, asking who they are talking to and what they are seeing. Literally, keep an eye on the screen and check browser history. Even a browser history that has obviously been deleted is a reason to be concerned.
- Don't be in the dark or complacent. Things change very rapidly in the online world. Regularly visit up-to-date cyber safety sites, for example, https://www.esafety.gov.au/esafety-information to see which advice and new apps are available to support protecting your child, as well as which ones are enabling them to hide their online activity from you.
- Know which interactive sites your child is using. Look them up yourself. See what they are about. Ask Google, 'is this site safe for children?' Many of these sites, for example, Omegle (literally a 'Talk to Strangers' site), have links to paedophile and child pornography rings.
- Know their passwords. We all want to give our children an appropriate amount of privacy as they grow up, but not at the price of their safety.
- Remind them again and again not to share passwords with their friends (this is increasingly an issue as young people give their passwords to friends so that they can continue a Snapchat streak for them).
- Use an internet service provider that has online safety protocols. However, filtering tools should not completely replace regular and open discussion and communication with young people about their internet use.
- Empower young people with information. Explain to younger children that some sites are for adults and tell them what to do and help them to not be afraid to tell you if they stumble upon an adult site.
- Ultimately you are in charge. Turn off the wi-fi if family rules around internet use are not being followed, or if you suspect your child is on their device late into the night.
- Finally, please don't think it 'can't' or 'won't' happen to your children. Teach your children about safe use of the internet the same way you teach them about road safety, by being present with them and holding their hand while they learn the ropes, and from about the same age. Then keep an eye on what they are doing for as long as you can.

The following website was referenced in the preparation of this article:
https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/online-safety

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