SPOTLIGHT ON SAFEGUARDING

WORKING TOGETHER TO KEEP OUR YOUNG PEOPLE SAFE

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Water Safety: Conversations that could save a life

As the weather gets warmer, many young people are drawn to rivers, lakes, reservoirs, canals and other outdoor swimming spots. Following several serious incidents involving young people entering cold water during last month's heatwave, it is important for parents and carers to understand the risks and have conversations with their children before the warm weather returns.

Why can open water be dangerous?

On a hot day, jumping into water can seem like a quick way to cool down. However, open water is very different from a swimming pool. Rivers, lakes, reservoirs and canals can remain surprisingly cold, even during periods of warm weather. Entering cold water suddenly can trigger 'cold water shock', causing an involuntary gasp, rapid breathing and panic. This can affect anyone, regardless of age or swimming ability. Even strong swimmers can quickly find themselves in difficulty.

Open water also contains risks that cannot always be seen from the surface. Hidden objects, sudden drops in depth, strong currents, slippery banks, weeds and poor visibility can all create dangerous situations. Water conditions can change quickly and what appears safe may not be safe at all.

Why are teenagers particularly at risk?

Many water-related incidents involving teenagers happen when young people are with friends rather than with parents or carers. Decisions are often made in the moment, influenced by peer pressure, a desire to cool down, boredom, dares, social media content or a belief that 'it will be fine'.

Research and water safety organisations have repeatedly highlighted that young people can underestimate the risks of open water and overestimate their swimming ability. Confidence in a swimming pool does not necessarily prepare someone for the challenges of cold, open water. For this reason, water safety is not simply about supervising children. It is about helping teenagers understand the risks and make safer decisions when adults are not there.

Conversations to have with your teenager

Rather than simply telling your child not to enter open water, try discussing situations they may realistically encounter.

You might ask:

- **If your friends decided to jump into a lake or river on a hot day, what would you do?**
- **Do you know what cold water shock is?**
- **Would you feel confident saying "no" if everyone else wanted to get in?**
- **What would you do if one of your friends got into difficulty in the water?**
- **Do you know how to call for help in an emergency?**

How parents and carers can help

While we cannot be with our teenagers all the time, we can equip them with knowledge and confidence to make safer choices.

Helpful steps include:

- talking regularly about water safety before periods of warm weather
- encouraging your child to swim only in supervised locations where lifeguards are present
- challenging the belief that being a strong swimmer removes risk
- discussing how peer pressure can influence decision-making
- helping your child think through what they would do if friends made unsafe choices around water.

If someone else is in trouble

Many tragedies occur when friends attempt to rescue one another.

Teach your child that if somebody is in difficulty in the water they should:

- **call 999 immediately**
- **encourage the person to float on their back**
- **throw something that floats if available**
- **never enter the water themselves to attempt a rescue.**

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'Ship' accounts: When online fun stops being fun

Many parents are familiar with social media trends, group chats and online challenges, but a growing number of schools are also reporting concerns about so-called 'ship' accounts.

The term *'ship'* comes from the word relationship. These social media accounts, often created by students, invite others to suggest or vote on which students should be paired together romantically. Some accounts also encourage comments about friendships, appearance, popularity or who someone should date.

While many young people see these accounts as harmless fun, they can quickly become upsetting for those involved and create real-world problems within friendship groups and school communities.

What are 'ship' accounts?

'Ship' accounts are typically found on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat. They are often anonymous or run by students, and may:

- pair students together romantically
- invite followers to suggest couples
- ask students to vote on who should date each other
- encourage comments about appearance or popularity
- post rumours about friendships or relationships
- share screenshots, photographs or personal information.

Some accounts may start as a joke between friends but can quickly attract large numbers of followers and comments.

Why can they be harmful?

Although some young people enjoy the attention or find the content amusing, 'ship' accounts often create situations where people lose control over how they are being discussed online.

Being publicly linked to someone can be embarrassing, particularly if the feelings are not mutual, if one or both young people are already in relationships or if they simply do not want their personal lives discussed publicly.

Students may feel pressured to respond to comments, explain friendships or defend themselves against rumours. What starts as a joke can quickly become a source of stress, anxiety or conflict.

'Ship' accounts can contribute to friendship breakdowns, arguments between peer groups, rumours and gossip, cyberbullying and online harassment

Teenagers are still learning about boundaries, consent and respectful relationships. Being able to discuss someone else's personal life online without their permission can blur those boundaries and make unkind behaviour feel acceptable.