Do You Really Know Who Your Children Are Talking to Online?

Chances are that if you have a child approaching their 'tweens' they will soon be clamouring for a) a mobile phone b) a social media account c) a games console - all of which could enable them to chat to complete strangers anywhere in the world.

The days of a family PC in the corner of the living room are long gone. Most of us carry the internet in our pockets these days so it's not surprising that our children want the same easy access. And once children get to nine or 10 years old they are in any case eager to go online and chat to their friends without a parent watching over their shoulder.

However, according to Ofcom, one in ten children aged 8-11 who go online say they have seen something in the past year that was worrying, nasty or offensive.

We all want to keep children safe online and many parents will at some point take action, like installing filters on their home broadband to stop children seeing unsuitable material. But filters don't protect children from strangers contacting them through social media, mobile apps, or online games.

The NSPCC wants to see all online accounts for under-16s set up to block messages from strangers, prevent users making their location or contact details public, set profiles as private by default on sign-up, and alert children to the risks if they choose make their profile public.

 Until these steps are taken by industry we all have to be extra vigilant about children's safety. So it's essential to have regular chats with your children about what to do to keep themselves safe, and stress that it's ok to come to you for help.

 The good news is that lots of parents are talking to children about online safety - since the NSPCC launched its latest online safety campaign in January around 400,000 parents have spoken with their children about the issue.

However, we're still concerned that some parents are missing out vital topics when they talk to their children about staying safe online.

For example, children have told us they want parents to talk about how to manage apps that track your location, but only one in five parents say they've covered this in online safety conversations.

And if parents aren't talking to children about things like location or privacy settings it can leave them at risk of online grooming. We've seen horrendous cases where offenders take a scattergun approach, targeting hundreds of children at a time online, often posing as another young person.

So we want all parents to make sure their online knowledge is up to date by checking out our updated Net Aware guide, published this week.

Among 12 sites that have now been added to the guide are Tapatalk and Pheed, which many parents may not be familiar with, plus well-known games like Call of Duty that allows users to chat online.

The guide now covers a total of 60 social networking sites, apps and games popular with children and is free to access at www.net-aware.org.uk

The digital world is here to stay and it's our job to make sure the next generation take their first steps online safely; aware of the risks, but confident about how to get where they want to be, just as our parents once taught us how to cross the road.

Claire Lilley

Head of Online Safety at NSPCC