

Online Safety for Parents

Helping to keep your children safe online

PARENTS' EDITION NO. 11

DEC 2015



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Alan is a consultant who has worked in the education sector for many years, specifically within ICT and internet safety (commonly known as e-safety).

He is passionate about the positive use of technology; that the internet and all it brings can be used as a force of good,

But as in all walks of life there are risks. Alans' main drive is to ensure that our children are protected as much as possible, not by wrapping in cotton wool, but good education so that children can enjoy technology and the internet - safely.

Foreword



Love it or not, we're close to that time of year again - Christmas.

It's that time when marketers and companies will put in that extra bit of effort to entice us and our children for shiny new tech gifts and games. It's possible that your child has already been badgering you for the latest game or console..

Visiting hundreds of schools and speaking to thousands of children, their parents and their teachers, the common concerns around gaming and consoles still remain, so I'm going to re-iterate some of the advice this month, particularly as the holidays are coming soon and children will likely be spending more time playing online or getting new games and consoles for Christmas.



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Introduction



Understandably, as adults we look back at our gaming when we were kids or teenagers and remember some of those wonderful games we would play with our friends, or if we were lucky enough, in our own house.

I remember back to my own teenage years (in the late 70's and early 80's) and my social circle was about hanging around the local cafe which had a few games machines in.

There was no actual violence (although it depends on your own interpretation of violence) and there certainly wasn't any sex. But things have changed and continue to change enormously, and whilst we should remember that the large of majority of games on the market are completely appropriate for children, there are some that I definitely wouldn't allow my children to play.

Why? Well, it may sound like a broken record, but some games are simply not appropriate for children; the content is very adult and realistic in terms of sex and violence.



Content

within games

One of the problems we have is that when something becomes very popular (particularly games) then children will want to play them.

When I speak to children in schools, and to their teachers, among the wonderful games that children are playing, 18 rated games are often mentioned by significant percentages of those children.

Commonly children will say that they play it round their friends house, or that they downloaded the game without their parents knowledge, and on some occasions that the game has been purchased for them.

Children may be subjected to peer pressure and in turn will exert that pressure onto you, “But Mum, everyone else is playing it...”

One of the age-old arguments I always hear is, “well I played violent games when I was a kid and I turned out alright.” This isn’t really an argument; modern-day games are far removed from what they used to be just a few years ago. However, to be fair to those who do use that argument,

the research and evidence in regards to the normalization of sex and violence on children is contradictory. But regardless of that fact, the content just isn’t appropriate for children.

Even if you didn’t play the game, you may remember the names Lara Croft and Tomb Raider. This was a fantastic game I used to play, full of adventure and puzzle-solving. Not anymore, it’s 18 rated now due to violence and language. Some will remember the original Grand Theft Auto game, all about driving fast cars. Not anymore, the sex and violence is extraordinary (see [HERE](#) and [HERE](#), **(WARNING: graphic content)** or just search on YouTube for GTA V sex scene).

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not telling you how to parent, that’s entirely up to you, what you allow your kids to play is your choice, but at the very least look at the games your children are playing or asking for. Search for them on YouTube or commonsensemedia.org to satisfy yourself in regards to the content of the games.

Games are not ‘just games’ anymore!



How much screen time?



Some interesting results were published in the journal *Pediatrics* from a study carried out in 2014 by psychologist Dr. Andrew Przybylski who analysed British surveys involving 5,000 children aged 10-15 years old.

Playing video games for a short period each day could have a small but positive impact on child development.

The children were asked a whole range of questions, and although scientists agree that more research is needed in this area, one of the conclusions was that: 'when compared with all other groups, including those who played no video games at all, young people reporting under an hour of play each day were most likely to say they were satisfied with their lives and showed the highest levels of positive social interactions.

The group also had fewer problems with emotional issues and lower levels of hyperactivity.

I think the age-old saying rings true here: a little and often is most beneficial.

Another aspect of screen-time that we shouldn't forget is what is commonly termed the 'blue light' effect.



This blue light is the frequency of light that comes from LED devices and in very basic terms fools the brain into thinking it is day time. and research has shown that there can be a significant reduction in the production of the sleep hormone, melatonin. This reduction means that children (and ourselves) may find it more difficult to get off to sleep, may have a very light and restless sleep, and as a result wake up more tired which in turn affects our mood and potentially our health.



What's the advice?

MODERATION is probably the biggest key aspect of all

Moderation in terms of the time children are spending on devices. Balance their online activities with real-world activities. Don't forget about the 'blue light' effect; consider turning those devices off at least one hour before sleep time which gives the brain time to return to normal.

Moderation in terms of the type of games they are playing and the content of those games. If they're asking for new games, look them up on the internet first as this can be very revealing.

Be curious about their online lives; that doesn't mean spying on them but having honest and open conversations with them, exactly the same as you would in regards to their real-world activities.

If they ask you for help, don't answer with 'I know nothing about technology'. This becomes a barrier for children and they may not come to you for help if they are worried about something.

Ensure your children know that if they do something wrong, or if somebody does or says something wrong to them, that you are there to help them. We know for a fact that some children won't speak to their parents (or a trusted adult) for fear of being judged or fear of having their technology taken away from them.

Appropriate boundaries are important. I'm not going to tell you how to parent, that would be inappropriate, however my personal parenting style is this: devices, gaming etc. are a privilege, not a right and there are sanctions in place for misuse or broken trust.

If you're unsure, talk to the school who will be only too happy to help you where they can.

Trust your parental instincts; if there has been a change in behaviour find out why. It's probably nothing but it's always best to check. One of the most common changes of behaviour I hear about (when talking to parents) is in regards to the amount of time children are spending playing games and this is having a negative impact on their behaviour.



Snippets and **useful articles**

Invisible Warning Signs: virtual self-harm

'Self-harm' is usually defined by physical injuries that are auto-inflicted, such as 'cutting', over or under-eating and substance abuse. The internet however, has given rise to a new form of self-abuse, conducted through social media sites to inflict emotional or psychological harm.

Link [HERE](#)

Apps on Apple and Android smartphones leak lots of users' information to third parties, research has suggested.

Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Harvard, and Carnegie-Mellon universities studied 110 apps available on Google Play and the Apple App Store.

They found 73% of the Android apps shared users' email addresses, and 47% of the iOS apps shared location data.

Link [HERE](#)

YouTube - here's a small selection of videos featuring yours truly discussing different aspects of online safety.

Link [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)

Understanding the impact of sexting on a child's mind.

Catherine Knibbs explains the psychology behind the growing use of sexting among young people and gives tips on what parents can do to help their children.

Link [HERE](#)

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Social Networking

Social networking is exactly that, being social. Think about it in terms of a huge party or gathering where you will get a diverse range of people from different backgrounds and with different interests.

Some of these people are there to socialise and meet new friends, some are there to network with others for reasons such as finding a new job or catch up with the latest developments in their interests or hobbies. Personally I use social networking extensively for connecting with like-minded people and for talking to experts in particular areas of my work.

Social networks and networking is hugely powerful but unfortunately, where there is a large gathering of people, there is always that small element who may be there for bad or negative purposes, and this is why social networking gets a bad name, because as human beings we tend to focus more on the bad than the good, but used correctly social media genuinely does have the power for a lot of good.

There are thousands of social networks out there, as there are thousands of 'apps' to connect to these social networks but they all have one purpose in common - communication. And this is one of the greatest fears of parents!

Who is communicating with our children, and why?

When talking with children in schools, I always talk about social media, including to children 7 years of age and above, some of whom are using hugely popular apps such as Instagram, Snapchat, and sometimes Facebook or ooVoo and others.

Some may think that talking about social media with younger children may incentivise them to use it but that isn't the case. I use these types of discussions as a way of identifying any risk areas that I can then pass onto teachers and parents. It is hugely important that I can talk to the children in an open and engaging manner otherwise we face the worst possible risk of all - sending it underground.

If that happens, children will be too scared to talk to teacher and parents if something goes wrong!





Should my child use social media?

I can't answer that question as there are lots of different aspects involved.



Strictly speaking, most (not all) social networks require users to be at least 13 years old.

The biggest reason is due to advertising, specifically targeted advertising. In other words collecting information about us (what we like, where we go, what we share, what we're searching for, our age, where we live etc.) in order to target advertising that may be of interest to us based on our browsing history and our personal information.

In the United States it is illegal to 'mine' and use this information for under 13's (without parental permission), therefore sites require users to be at least 13 years of age.

(If you want to know more, look up the U.S. law COPPA, the Childrens Online Privacy and Protection Act)

However, we know that there is a huge amount of

inappropriate content out there; we know there is the potential for others to contact our children; and we know that the conduct of some people would not be appropriate.

What is important is that you talk openly with your children. What are they using, for what purpose, who are they talking to, do they know how to apply privacy settings, do they know how to block and report an individual?

Do you know how to do all of these things?





Contact Alan Mackenzie

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