Communicating Safely

Alan Mackenzie, Online Safety Specialist

As human beings the vast majority of us have a need for communication and socialization; for work, friends and family, to have fun, catch up, learn new things or just gossip. Increasingly this socialization is taking place online and during the pandemic we can expect to see a significant rise in people communicating and socializing online, including children, whether that be in their games or using apps on their device so it's important if they are communicating online, they are doing it safely.

Children are going to make mistakes and push boundaries; this is an important part of growing up. It's true in real life as it is online and as parents or educators we teach our children important principles of how to stay as safe as possible and how they do that.

But being online presents many different challenges compared to real life. The obvious one would be that you can see a real person in real life, whereas online that may not always be the case; anyone can pretend to be someone else and it is well known for offenders to use this to their advantage. This is what we call a risk. Importantly it doesn't suggest harm, just the potential for harm, which is why we mitigate the risk in order to reduce that potential for harm.

So what is a risk? That's a difficult one to answer, there isn't such a thing as a 'list of risks'. Think about risks in real life: sitting reading this article with a cup of tea, will you spill it? Walking out the front door that's got a step. Will you trip? Someone walking up to you in the street and asking for your name and address. Do you give it to them? You don't think about any of these because you instinctively know, it's learned experience.

It's impossible to list all risks and that's just as true online. To help parents we simplify the main risks into 4 categories:

- **Content**
    - What can your children see when they are online?
- **Contact**
    - Who are they talking to and who is talking to them?
- **Conduct**
    - On that game or using that app, what is their behaviour?
- **Commercialism**

o In-app or in-game purchases. Identity theft. Social media companies harvesting our personal information to target adverts.

The area that concerns many parents above all others is contact. Games and apps are designed for contact, or in other words socialization. It's the very thing they rely on for in-game purchases and driving more adverts, so mitigating or preventing contact can be frustrating. It's right that parents should be concerned, we know that offenders will use social isolation as a means to communicate with more children, and as more children spend more time online the risk factor increases. But equally in these times of social isolation we don't want to prevent children from having contact with their friends and loved ones, they need a sense of normality as much as reasonably possible, but equally we need to ensure that any contact is as safe as possible.

Specific advice and guidance would depend on a number of different factors but at the top of the list is age and cognitive ability. But consider these general tips:

Usage – what apps are they using, what games are they playing? Are they age appropriate? Is there a means of communication? Can you turn chat off or set the account to private?

Vigilance – with more children spending more time online, as parents we need to be a lot more vigilant. That doesn't mean prevention, it just means keeping a closer eye on what they are doing.

Curiosity – do you know what they are doing, who they are talking to and how? That doesn't mean spying on them but having conversations with them. Let them know why you are asking; because you want to keep them safe. Ask them to walk you through the contacts they speak to in their games and apps. Are you happy with all of these?

Education – all children receive online safety education at school. Ask them what they would do if they were contacted by someone or if they felt uncomfortable about something. Most children say they would talk to their parents, but some say they wouldn't due to a fear of being judged or what their parents would say, which is why talking to them in a non-judgemental way is so important, especially if something has gone wrong.

About Alan Mackenzie

For many years I was the online safety lead at Lincolnshire County Council, raising initiatives across all schools, police, the voluntary sector and others with positive outcomes and a significant increase in online safety awareness

I became a CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection) Ambassador in 2008, which was a great starting point, but the world is changing rapidly, technology is diversifying at an extraordinary rate and almost all behaviours are now enacted online. So whilst online safety is predominantly about safeguarding, the wider aspects of behaviour and wellbeing are really starting to come to the fore which take into account more emotional, behavioural and usage aspects of technology.

I am an associate member of the UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) and I also partner with other companies and charities who share the same ethos as me in order to spread the word that online safety is something that can be positive and empowering.

I work with hundreds of schools nationally and internationally and speak at a range of national conferences, but I also like to get involved with projects on behalf of other companies and charities to assist in areas they may not specialise in, which includes reviewing new products on the market to advise on online safety or safeguarding issues, writing whitepapers or articles on a range of different subjects, or to get involved and advise on new educational initiatives.

About GoBubble

GoBubble is the leader in building safer, healthier and kinder digital communities. Launched in 2019 from the award winning eCadets digital citizenship programme, GoBubble uses a combination of security checks, proprietary real-time content moderation powered by AI and biometric age verification to reduce the risk of children being exposed to cyberbullying, adult content and online predators.

The team behind GoBubble are parents, teachers and all led by a former police sergeant, Henry Platten, who is the award winning "Safeguarding Champion of the Year". The team has won all of the top industry awards for making the internet a safer place and keeping all children safe.

There are now more the 1,500 primary schools across 39 countries registered.