

Parents of Pre-teens

Podcast transcripts

Introduction

Hello and welcome to our podcast! We are Barnardo's CARE. By working in collaboration with The Children's Society we are able to provide support to parents and carers of young people at risk of, or affected by, child exploitation in the Essex area. Our six bite-sized episodes aim to provide you with some key pieces of information, advice and guidance, together with some top-tips to enhance your knowledge and help maximise the safeguards available to protect against online grooming.

Episode 1: 'The wonder years'

Being the parent or carer of a pre-teen/ teen is a rewarding experience (I can say this as someone who has made it to the other side), but it is also without a doubt a very stressful time and can be really challenging. It may feel as though all your tried and tested parenting expertise has completely abandoned you, leaving you wondering: what do I do? Is it me? Is it this hard for everyone?

Our children's brains go through a massive developmental stage during the teenage years. The part responsible for logical, rational and reasonable thinking is still growing. There is also another area in charge of regulating their emotions that becomes hypersensitive.

So, what does this actually mean?

It means they find it difficult to make decisions or plan ahead. They lack the ability to fully understand consequences, or view anything from someone else's perspective. It also means they become reward-led.

They get an increased drive for risk taking and trying out new things. They're super sensitive to social status and so they start craving peer approval.

It is also a REALLY confusing time for our young people. Not only do they have all this making them behave and act differently, they have the physical changes that come with the delightful puberty to boot!

So, when we consider they're coping with:

- massive brain developmental stage
- puberty, and
- starting or navigating secondary school....

It's no wonder many of our young people are struggling with their self-esteem and self-identity! The need to fit in somewhere can often be what makes extra them vulnerable at this key transitional time.

Episode 2: The Modern World

(Please note this episode contains a trigger warning!)

With thanks to technology our world has become a much smaller place, we have the convenience to do our food shop at midnight, our banking on the train and speak to our children's teachers from the comfort of our sofa all with a click, should we feel the need.

We live in a 24/7, existence and although it has many, many advantages we must also consider how this impacts upon our children. There are some research figures that suggest the numbers of children exploited online doubles between the ages of 11 and 12. Scary, huh?!

Stranger danger now means something completely different! No longer does it mean the 'strange person trying to lure kids in with the promise of sweets or puppy dogs'.

In the modern world, an online exploiter is anonymous and extremely skilled! Not all online grooming and exploitation operates with the intention of a face to face meeting, some perpetrators intentions are to get explicit images or webcam and video footage.

In the case of criminal exploitation, or County Lines, the exploitation may have the intention to 'recruit' with the promise of earning easy money, enhanced social status and protection.

Without meaning to scare you, online grooming can happen fast! Perpetrators have access to millions of children 24 hours, 7 days a week! They can, and do appear on apps, in chat-rooms, on gaming platforms and anywhere aimed to attract children and young people.

The exploiter may have a fake profile or many fake profiles, pretending to be someone younger, someone that a pre-teen or teen could relate to, or admire, and being in a virtual space can often make our children more trusting.

If we consider all this information together with the knowledge we have from episode 1, we can understand how our pre-teen's or teenager's key transitional developmental phase combined with their changing and advancing internet use around this age makes them increasingly vulnerable at this stage.

It really amplifies the need for us parents and carers to understand this topic and the safeguards available to us.

In the next episode we will be talking about digital dangers.

Episode 3: Digital Dangers

The digital age is here to stay. Young people seem to know so much more than us adults, they have grown up with this technology and it seems to be so easy for our young people to understand.

Although our pre-teens and teens have just taken to this digital world like a duck to water, we can find it a complex and confusing place. The constant stream of apps, chat rooms, gaming platforms, social media and all things internet related can feel like a minefield of information...and that's before including all the updates!

So, with that in mind it's important to know what and where the dangers are. The internet is the main access point or gateway to the online world. It seems that many of our pre-teens and teenagers find it almost impossible to live without the internet and it is accessible from so many devices; phone, tablets, kindles, laptops, even most of our TV's now have internet access enabled.

AND Internet hotspots are everywhere! Free wifi can be accessed in so many places, shops, restaurants, fast food places and even some high streets and town centres but there is also wifi access at friends' houses and via mobile data.

Some research has suggested that about a third of 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week report having received unwanted sexual (31%) or nasty (33%) comments via e-mail, chat, direct message (DM) or text.

In contrast, only 7% of parents and carers think their child have received such comments.

And then there are the nudes (or nude-selfies or 'sexting'). Our pre-teens and teens will all have some ideas of internet safety, they may even know a little about the law.

Just so there is no confusion, let me use this moment to talk about the law. It is illegal to produce, possess, store or share indecent, sexual or naked images and videos of anyone under 18:

- even if a child allowed it to be taken
- even if a young person takes the explicit photo of themselves
- even if it is shared and distributed between children of the same age.

Remember, our young people are pre-disposed to trying new things and taking risks and there are lots of reasons why a young person may take and maybe share a nude selfie.

They may be exploring their sexuality, or they may be looking for social acceptance, or joining in because they think everyone is doing it. Or they may be being asked, pressured, coerced or manipulated.

Over the next episodes we will be talking about how to approach and deal with difficult a situation such as this and how we can all do our best to protect against them.

Episode 4. Know your stuff!

By now you are most likely thinking how an earth can I EVER make it safe? I'm going to be completely honest with you. There are no absolute guaranteed ways to prevent online grooming from happening. What there is however, are a number of ways to manage the potential risks.

So for some top tips...

If you can, start early with those boundaries!

Make things like screen time restrictions the norm, together with a rule for 'handing in devices before bedtime' and spend some time device free as a whole family,

maybe at dinner time? Try to make these things all part of your normal daily routine, so it isn't something you have to try to remember.

Do your research!

There is lots of information available and can be found really easily by doing a quick online search. Just make sure the information you read is from a reputable source. Some good places to start include: The NSPCC, ChildNet, Netaware, CEOP's 'Think you know' campaign and the Essex Safeguarding Children Board found at www.escb.co.uk

Know how to set your parental controls!

Most broadband and mobile phone providers have some great digital parenting guides. You should be able to find these online by doing a quick online search but your providers will help you find them or may even be able to send you a paper copy if you ask. Look at the manufacturer's manuals or operating instructions for parent controls on devices or games consoles. There are some great 'How to guides' on YouTube showing how to use these setting options.

Get to know your apps and games!

Did you know that all apps including those such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and even WhatsApp have a minimum age requirement? You can check the recommended age by looking at the information in the apple or play store. In addition, many apps share your location as a standard setting. If your pre-teen or teen has these apps, ensure the accounts are set to private and location settings are switched off. Download the apps yourself, and play around with them to familiarise yourself with and know a little more about how they work.

When it comes to games, once again a quick online search will give you a good overview but don't forget the PEGI ratings are there to indicate age appropriateness. If you already have the game the best way to learn about it is to play it!

Take an interest (even if you have to fake it!) and play those ‘popular’ games **with** your child or children, it helps support and encourage communication between yourself and your child regarding the game or gaming platform. Being curious while playing and letting your child teach you how to play and what the different features do or mean can be a great monitoring tool, and you’ll have some fun together too!

The 2 Johns are also a great resource to know about, you can find them on both Facebook and Instagram, just search ‘the 2 johns online community’... they often do talks in schools and at events and their social media pages allow you to ask questions relating to online safety.

Episode 5: Who to Blame?

Parents and carers of young people who have experienced online exploitation often express that they feel they are somehow to blame, that they should have known something was happening or been able to stop it.

As a parent or carer you are NOT to blame if has or does happen! Nor is your child ever to blame! **A child or young person is not complicit in their abuse and it is never their fault!**

Even if a child or young person has extensive knowledge of online exploitation and online safety; they may not be able to recognise it happening to them. SO, with this in mind, let’s talk about the language we use...the words we use are powerful things!

The old phrase “sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me” just isn’t true. I’m sure we can all recall a time in our lives that someone made a comment or said something to us that hurt our feelings – it sticks with us, regardless of whether it was intended to be hurtful or not.

Sometimes, and often without meaning to, we can use words and phrases that are condemning... this is known as victim blaming. Here are a few examples that you may have heard in conversations or in the media or maybe even said yourself:

- If a child or young person is being bullied, we should not be asking 'why didn't they fight back?'
- If a child or young person is receiving abusive messages, we should not be asking 'are they being too sensitive?' or 'do they need to be more resilient?'
- If a child or young person does send a nude to someone, we should not be saying 'it's their fault for taking it in the first place'.
- If a child or young person starts a conversation with someone online that they don't know, we should not be saying 'it's your fault for accepting the follower or friend request'.

No child or young person brings it upon themselves. A child or young person is not complicit in their abuse and it is not ever their fault! If a child has been persuaded, coerced, manipulated or exploited – they are a victim.

Only the exploiter is guilty. Only the exploiter should be condemned. Only the exploiter should be blamed.

So, how on earth do you talk to your child about something like this? How do you find the right words?

Well, in all honesty, it won't be easy! And it can sometimes be really tough trying to find the right words when you need to have difficult conversations, it can be REALLY stressful!

Remember us talking about your stress response in an earlier episode? Well, this is another reason why getting that under control and allowing yourself a little time to process and regulate is really important.

Having a calm conversation with your child will be reassuring for them, even if the subject you're talking about is REALLY difficult! Being calm will show them that you are in control of the situation (even if you feel far from in control), that they can trust you, and this will help them to feel safe!

In the next episode we will be talking about where to get help.

Episode 6. HELP!!

So, what do you do if it does happen? I'm not going to lie, this could be one of the toughest things you have ever had to deal with as a parent or carer and you're probably going to be stressed, beyond stressed!

Now, the problem with being extremely stressed is it makes us emotional; we might cry, shout, scream, or do all three! It can make us feel physically unwell; we might feel or be sick, get a funny tummy or headache, and it most certainly makes us behave differently; we might get angry, we might feel frozen to the spot, we might want to withdraw from the world and pretend it isn't happening and we might even feel disconnected – like it's not real, like living in a dream. This is all perfectly natural - it's your built-in survival response, and we ALL have it. Even your pre-teen or teen has it.

Now, if you need to scream, shout, hide for a bit, any of these things its fine but do it with a partner, a friend, a parent, or a professional, just to get it out of your system. As long as it's NOT at, or TO, your pre-teen or teenager.

PLEASE remember, that although this is your baby, it has happened to them. They are the victim.

First and foremost they will need reassurance that they did nothing wrong. Once the shock has eased a little, you can consider how to deal with it. There are a number of things you can do at this stage.

- You may wish to refer the ESCB website; this is the Essex Safeguard Children Board – there is lots of useful information there.
- You could call the O2 & NSPCC helpline on 0808 800 5002
- You call or look on the websites of a local organisation such as The Children's Society or Barnardo's
- You could report it online to www.CEOP.police.uk
- There are report options on apps and on gaming platforms
- If you think there is a risk of significant harm to a child, you should call The Children and Families Hub on 0345 603 7627
- If you think there is an immediate danger to life or a criminal act being committed you should call 999