Online risk: myths and facts

The internet is a wonderful resource for young people and offers unprecedented opportunities for connecting and learning. But it can also be scary. Many parents are afraid their children will be exposed to upsetting content or meet dangerous people online. What are the facts about online risk?

Risk vs harm

First, it's important to know the difference between risk and harm. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but there is a clear distinction. When we talk about risk, we mean the *possibility* that something negative or dangerous will happen. Harm, of course, refers to actual damage or trauma.

A lot of our conversations about keeping kids safe online confuse the two. There are certainly risks associated with internet use, but for the majority of young people these risks will never lead to harm. A 2014 survey by EU Kids Online, for instance, found that though children are indeed exposed to some risk when they go online, less than a fifth of nine to 16 year olds said they had been bothered or upset by something they'd seen online within the past year.[1]

For internet safety information to be helpful, it needs to reflect the reality of young people's experiences online – the risks they face and the actual possibility of harm. Here are a few common online safety myths, along with the truth about each one – and some tips on using that information to help your children stay safe.

Myth: Adults who want to harm children target them by pretending to be young people themselves.

Fact: This can be the case, but according to the Crimes Against Children Research Center,[2] most online offenders admit they are older before trying to convince their victims to meet in person or engage in sexual activity online. They typically rely on flattery and young people's normal interest in sex and relationships to target children, not solely on deception about their age.

What can you do? Make sure your children know that adults who want to talk about sex online are breaking the law – it's illegal for an adult to send sexual messages to a child – and should always be avoided. Discuss the risks involved in sending revealing images or using webcams, which can always be recorded. And talk to them about the risks of meeting up with online-only friends in real life. Encourage them to talk to you if they are ever worried about anything that happens online. Show them how to report abuse to CEOP, if anyone online ever makes them feel uncomfortable.

Please note, this handout is only a taster of a resource and is not complete. To gain access to the full resource, attend the Digital Parenting Facilitator training. Find out more at http://parentzone.org.uk/training/digital-parenting-facilitator-training.
[1]http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60512/1/__lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_EU%20Kids%20Online_EU%20Kids_interactive_Final_Report_2014.pdf
[2] http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/safety_ed.html