At National Online Safety we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information they need to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one platform of many which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.

WHAT TRUSTED ADULTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT: SOCIAL MEDIA & MENTAL HEALTH

Social Media is often scrutinised as having a negative impact on children's mental health. Children and young people are now growing up in a technology dominated world, and social media plays a major role in their social lives. This balanced guide focuses on both the positive and negative impacts that social media can bring to young people and their mental health.

POSITIVE IMPACTS

EASY ACCESS TO SUPPORT AND HELP

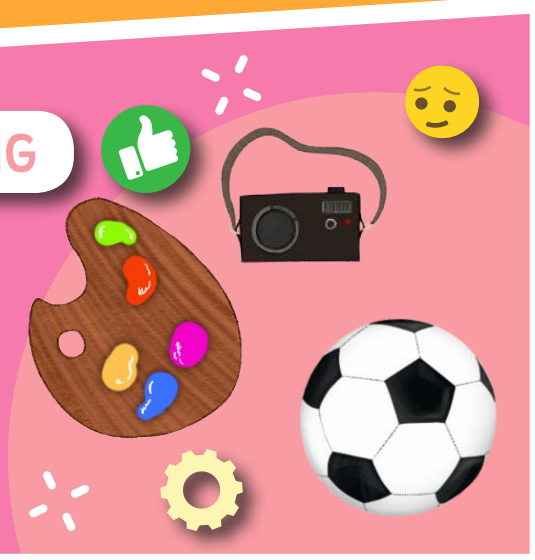
Due to delays in young people getting help for their mental health, such as experiencing low mood, or suffering from anxiety, they may sometimes reach out to access support from others online. Sharing problems or issues with friends, peers and broader social networks can be met with positive reaction, with nearly 7 in 10 teens reporting to receive support on social media during tough or challenging times. Where there are moderated communities which offer support and guidance, children can be provided with a great source of support.

SUSTAINING FRIENDSHIPS AND MAKING CONNECTIONS

There is evidence to suggest that strong adolescent friendships can be enhanced by social media interaction, allowing children to create stronger bonds with people they already know. Online relationships can actually make children more relationship-oriented, thoughtful, and empathic. By sharing comments on pictures, videos and posts, it can create long-term friendships as they can continually keep in touch, even with a distance between them.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Support can be found in various places online; sometimes this is known as "finding your tribe". Online platforms and groups can provide a wonderful sense of belonging for children. They can find peers with similar interests and circumstances which can sometimes be difficult to find in real-life. As a result, this can create stronger connections and help to build confidence.



NEGATIVE IMPACTS

SELF-ESTEEM & BODY IMAGE

There are 10 million new photographs uploaded to Facebook alone every hour, providing an almost endless potential for young people to be drawn into appearance-based comparisons whilst online. No one is the same as how they portray themselves online as we tend to only show the best part of ourselves. The pressure to fit-in and conform is huge, which can become a driving force for children to replicate what they see from friends, celebrities and sponsored adverts. This pressure may contribute to anxiety, low mood and a feeling of inadequacy. As a result, it can lead to a feeling of low satisfaction with their own lives.

HARMFUL ADVICE

The online world provides the opportunity for anybody to upload and share photoshopped pictures, edited video, fake news and even unvetted advice. Children may stumble upon this, which could potentially encourage them make wrong decisions and not get the help that they need. It's important that you teach your child to differentiate between what is true and useful information and what is fake.

ADDICTION AND COMPULSIVE CHECKING

Social media addiction is thought to affect around 5% of teenagers. The Office for National Statistics found that children who spend more than 3 hours a day on social media are more than twice as likely to support poor mental health. Furthermore, compulsive checking due to 'Fear Of Missing Out' has been linked to poor and disturbed sleep, as well as difficulty to relax during evenings. One in five young people say they wake up during the night to check messages on social media, leading them to be three times as more likely to feel constantly tired at school than their classmates who don't use social media during the night.

CYBERBULLYING

One recent large-scale UK study showed that cyberbullying is one of the biggest challenges for young people. Other studies suggest that cyberbullying has a bigger effect on wellbeing and mental health than other types of bullying. 7 in 10 young people have experienced cyberbullying, with 37% of young people saying they experience cyberbullying on a high-frequency basis. Young people are twice as likely to be bullied on Facebook than on any other social network.

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Meet our expert

This guide has been written by Anna Bateman. Anna is passionate about placing prevention at the heart of every school, integrating mental wellbeing within the curriculum, school culture and systems. She is also a member of the advisory group for the Department of Education, advising them on their mental health green paper.

HELPFUL APPS:

- Hub of Hope - https://hubofhope.co.uk/
- Mindshift
- Smiling Mind

SOURCES OF HELP:

- Childline, 0800 1111 or visit their website
- Bullying UK, 0808 8002222
- Young Minds Parents line, 0808 802 5544

SOURCES: https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/social-media-young-people-and-mental-health, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/measuringnationalwellbeing/2015-10-20, https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/62be270a-a55f-4719-ad668c2ec7a74c2a.pdf, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201505/5-warning-signs-mental-health-risk

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