**Internet safety on return to face-to-face Scouting, March 2021**

I’ve recently attended an on-line webinar run by the UK Safer Internet Centre, South West Grid for Learning and the Internet Watch Foundation. They provided information on research that has been carried out over the past few years (including this last year) and compared results. There is a diagram on the website which shows in graphic form ‘what happens in an internet minute’ which is mind-blowing!

Points to note (and reminders):

* Safety should be empowering, not stifling;
* The risks in using the internet are risks to all, not just young people;
* The main issues are the protection of data and privacy;
* Just like adults, young people involved in on-line meetings may well be doing other things in the background and therefore will not necessarily be fully involved;
* When back to face-to-face Scouting, leaders need to be aware that they may pick up on issues young people have had with risky / harmful behaviour while on-line during lock down.

The research looked at covers the following areas and (I think) give food for thought:

**1) Gaming:** research has shown that the average Gamer is in their 30s, not their teens and gaming is split 60% men and 40% women. There has been an increase in gaming on-line during lock down in all age groups; this has not necessarily been detrimental to the people involved - gaming has been shown to impact positively on mental health, because 45% of players report interacting with their friends during gaming sessions. The down sides have been the blocking out of everything else during gaming sessions and expenditure required by some games in order to progress. Time spent on gaming can be monitored by parents in the same way as overall internet use and gift cards are available which will limit expenditure.

**2) On-line bullying:** Ofcom has carried out research into life in lockdown and found a reduction in occurrences because of no face-to-face contact. On-line abuse has been found to be linked to physical abuse and so if physical abuse does not happen because of not meeting physically, then on-line bullying reduces too. When questioned about what was worrying about the return to school, many yp sited abuse beginning again.

However, hate speech and toxic content on-line have both increased during lockdown.

**3) Mental wellbeing:** In 2019, the Royal Society for Public Health published research into the + and - of online contact.

Suggested ways of dealing with this include:

* agreeing boundaries;
* leading by example and
* discussion;

**Strategies can include:**

* screen-free mealtimes;
* no screen time before bed;
* taking a break every two hours and
* taking a ‘precautionary approach’ to new contacts on-line.

More info on this can be found at:

<https://www.intechopen.com/books/selected-topics-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/social-media-and-young-people-s-mental-health>

**4) Harmful content:** when looking for advice on how to handle this, check the credibility of organisations giving advice - some have ulterior motives; don’t issue blanket warnings because if people have not heard of the issue, they are likely to look it up. Instead, discuss the issue (eg sites which allegedly encourage suicide), but don’t name individual sites.

In 2020, there has been a 77% increase in self-generated sexual abuse images; in the past, young people under 18 would have fallen foul of the law, but recent advice to police indicates that they should be treated as victims not perpetrators, unless there is evidence of ‘intent’ - see ‘So you got naked online’ below for more information.

Based on this, it’s clear that we need to help young people stay safe - we can do this by:

* Taking ownership of any on-line activities we encourage;
* Ensuring that adults and yp follow the stay safe policy of The Scouts;
* Providing training and support in using the internet and
* Reporting any concerns.

**Additional information and resources:**

**Safer Internet Day 2022** is scheduled for Tuesday 8th February 2022.

**Social Media Checklists** - booklets looking at keeping your profile settings under control in things like Facebook and Twitter can be found at:

<https://swgfl.org.uk/resources/checklists/>

**So you got naked online** is a resource that offers yp and parents advice and strategies to support the issues resulting from sexting; more information can be found at:

<https://swgfl.org.uk/resources/so-you-got-naked-online/>

**Covid19:** research by the UK Safer Internet Centre looked at the expectations and effects COVID-19 has had towards children online.

Covid-19 has affected the lives of billions of people across the world, with unprecedented peacetime restrictions imposed. The reaction has been an extraordinary digital migration; a migration online to maintain some form of normality in terms of social, economic, entertainment and learning. This is shown in diagram form in the document ‘Covid-19 expectations and effects online’ which is also on the website.

The report concluded:

COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on the lives of billions of children across the world. The digital migration that ensued was nearly universal and, as usual, children were the pioneers. This has only been possible through the availability of digital services and infrastructure and the impact on these is clear to see. Predictably however, this heightened digital use by children comes with associated increased risks and impact, eloquently highlighted by many individuals and agencies.

Whilst some of the predictions of likely impacts on children can be seen in the experience and research evidence, it is perhaps a little too early to understand the total extent of the impact on children.

The evidence would suggest that:

* Whilst many have access to technology and connectivity, this is not universal and the ‘digital divide’ will have an impact;
* There has been an impact on individuals searching for child sexual abuse content, alongside an increase in access to adult content online;
* Children have heightened anxiety associated with the pandemic and restrictions;
* Parents are anxious that their children’s education will be impacted.

The full report can be found at:

<https://swgfl.org.uk/assets/documents/covid-19-expectations-and-effects-on-children-online.pdf>

As always, if you have any queries or concerns, do please get in touch…..

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