

The recent TV series ‘Adolescence’ has sparked conversations about the real-life challenges young people face, both online and offline. While the digital world offers incredible opportunities for learning and socialising, it also presents risks that parents and carers need to be aware of. This newsletter highlights online dangers associated with how children and teens communicate online and provides practical ways to help keep your child safe.



What can we learn from the TV Show ‘Adolescence’?

In Adolescence, Jamie struggles with feeling lonely and having low self-esteem. There are also signs that he has been influenced by harmful ideas online, especially about women. This is shown when Katie comments on his Instagram photos using certain symbols linked to online groups known as ‘Incels’.

The programme pulled back the curtain on something every parent needs to know—the hidden language of emojis. Below are the examples used in the programme that even the police did not recognise;

- Red Pill – “I see the truth.” Used in male spaces to mean waking up to supposed hidden ‘truths’ about women and society, which are often misogynistic.
- Blue Pill – Represents those who are “blind to the truth” or believe in mainstream views about relationships and gender such as fairness and equality.
- ★ Dynamite Emoji – An “exploding red pill,” meaning someone is an incel.
- Kidney Bean – A symbol linked to incel culture, sometimes mocking women.
- 👉 100 Emoji – Tied to the “80/20 rule,” the belief that 80% of women are only attracted to 20% of men.

- ❤️💜💛💔💖 Heart Colours – Not just about love!
- ❤️ = Love
- 💜 = Lust
- 💛 = “Are you interested?”
- 💖 = Interested but not in sex
- 💔 = “You’ll be okay”

What does ‘incel’ mean?

An incel (short for “involuntary celibate”) is someone, usually male, who feels rejected in romantic or social relationships and may blame others—often women—for their struggles. Some online incel communities promote negative or extremist views, which can be harmful to any gender. Parents should be aware of this term as young people may come across it online, sometimes in discussions that encourage unhealthy attitudes towards relationships and gender.

What is ‘Extremism’?

Extremism means strongly believing in an idea in a way that is dangerous or harmful to others. People with extreme views may reject different opinions and sometimes encourage hate or violence. Extremist ideas can easily spread online. ‘Adolescence’ shows how extreme ideas about male and female stereotypes have crept into different online platforms.

Some people with extreme views try to deliberately influence or ‘radicalise’ young or vulnerable people online. They may start this process on familiar apps like Facebook, X, Insta, TikTok, Snapchat and Youtube but will then invite people to other more secretive online spaces like Gab, Discord, V Kontakte (VK), Chan, Odysee, Telegram, Parler DLive, Steam, Twitch, Element, Chirpwire and Vidlii.

What can parents and carers do?

Some current slang words and symbols used by children and teenagers have started out as language used in online communities where people have extreme views. Just because your child uses these symbols, doesn’t automatically mean they are accessing harmful online spaces. Your child may also not know where the words or symbols originally came from or how harmful they are, but they may be influencing their thinking.

However, the risks are very real and your support and guidance as a parent or carer are really important. Here are 7 key things you can do;

- 1 Be Curious, Not Confrontational** – Ask open questions like, “I heard that emojis can have hidden meanings. Do you know about this?” Keep it light and friendly.
- 2 Create a Safe Space** – If your child fears getting into trouble, they won’t share. Let them know you’re there to listen, not just to tell them off.
- 3 Learn Together** – Ask them to explain their online world. What do symbols mean? Who do they follow? Instead of guessing, just ask.
- 4 Encourage Smart Thinking** – Help them question what they see online. “Why do you think some people push this idea? Who gains from it?” Teach them to think and ask questions, not just follow.
- 5 Check In, Don’t Spy** – Honest chats work better than secret snooping. Make online check-ins a normal part of parenting, not just a reaction to problems.
- 6 Talk About Online Tricks** – Explain how harmful groups try to make young people feel special, luring them in with what might seem like secret information.
- 7 Boost Their Confidence** – When kids feel happy and valued in real life, they’re less likely to look for approval in risky online spaces.

Do teenagers spend too long online?



Screens are undeniably part of modern life and screen time is on the rise, especially among teenagers. Several recent studies give average times from between 3 to 7 hours per day.

Reassuringly, Ofcom research tells us that most teenagers also recognise that they spend too long on screens. So it makes sense for the adults in their lives to help them manage screen time. Role modelling screen downtime and setting boundaries such as no screens during meal times or family time and at bedtime and having your phone switched off at school can be simple things you can do to help to help your child develop good habits.

Changing your own habits and those of your child can be easier said than done though. The Internet Matters website has some great ideas targeted to different age groups including under 5s, 5-7, 7-11, 11-14 and 14+ [Click here to find out more](#)

Want to read more about children and smartphone ‘addiction’? Psychologist Jonathan Haidt has written a bestseller called ‘The Anxious Generation’ linking smartphone use to mental health. For a 5 minute read covering some of his main ideas [click here](#).

HAVING OPEN CONVERSATIONS WITH MY CHILD ABOUT ONLINE HARMS

Having open conversations with your child about their online activities is one of the best ways to help keep your child safe. Starting with positives like ‘what do you enjoy doing online?’ and asking questions like ‘if someone was being mean and everyone was laughing, what would you do?’ are great ways to start without making your child feel judged. There’s a lot of advice for parents and carers online and here are a few examples you may find helpful:

Mumsnet: In collaboration with experts, Mumsnet offers conversation starters designed to make it easier for families to talk about online safety, encouraging open dialogues around the dinner table. [Mumsnet](#)

Parent Club: Highlights the importance of integrating online safety talks into everyday conversations, ensuring children understand the significance of staying safe online. [parentclub.scot](#)

EE PhoneSmart: Provides tips on opening dialogues about online safety, encouraging children to share their online experiences and discuss potential risks. [Parent - Homepage](#)

Barnardo's: Provides guidance on age-appropriate conversations, tailoring discussions to your child's developmental stage to effectively address online safety concerns. [Barnardo's](#)

The following websites all contain useful sources of information for parents and carers. Click the image to access.

