At The National College, our WakeUpWednesday guides empower and equip parents, carers and educators with the confidence and practical skills to be able to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with children about online safety, mental health and wellbeing, and climate change. Formerly delivered by National Online Safety, these guides now address wider topics and themes. For further guides, hints and tips, please visit nationalcollege.com. **Trigger Warning:** This guide contains mention of suicide, which may be distressing for some readers.

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about

MAKING FRIENDS ONLINE

In today's digital world, it's increasingly common for children to form friendships with people they've never met in person. While online connections can offer children a sense of belonging, they also carry significant risks. Around 19% of children aged 10 to 15 in England and Wales have chatted online with someone they've never met face to face. This guide offers expert advice for parents and educators on helping children navigate online friendships safely.

ONLINE GROOMING THREATS

Predators can use games, chat apps or social media platforms to build relationships with children and gain their trust. This may quickly develop into grooming or exploitation. Between April 2017 and March 2023, UK police recorded nearly 34,000 online grooming offences – an 82% increase in just five years.

EXPOSURE TO INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

Children may encounter distressing or explicit material while interacting with online contacts – especially via TikTok, Instagram or Snapchat. This is evidenced in a survey by the Children's Commissioner for England, which found that 45% of children aged 8 to 17 had seen content online that made them feel uncomfortable, worried or upset.

PRIVACY AND DATA RISKS

Children and young people often overshare personal details – such as where they live or go to school – without understanding the consequences. In fact, 4.4% of 10 to 15-year-olds in the UK have met up in real life with someone they'd only spoken to online.

COMPROMISED PERSONAL SAFETY

Meeting an online 'friend' in real life risks placing a child in serious danger. From abduction to coercion, the consequences can be devastating. Reports of children being harmed after such meetings are becoming increasingly common in the UK, highlighting the need for safeguarding intervention.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

Online harm – such as cyberbullying, grooming or exposure to disturbing content – can lead to long-term emotional issues, including anxiety, depression and PTSD. 'Sextortion' gangs, who threaten to release sexual information about a person unless they pay them money, have reportedly targeted children as young as 11, leaving them traumatised and ashamed.

LONG-TERM REPERCUSSIONS

Children exposed to harmful online relationships early on may develop unhealthy beliefs about relationships, consent, or self-worth. In a recent case, a 26-year-old posed as a girl on Snapchat to befriend children aged 10 to 16, manipulating them into sexual activity and causing profound emotional distress. One 12-year-old tragically died by suicide, highlighting the long-term psychological harm online friendships with strangers can cause.

Advice for Parents & Educators

TEACH SAFE ONLINE HABITS

Help children understand how to use privacy settings, protect their personal information, spot fake profiles, and report anything suspicious or concerning, like pressure tactics. Encourage them to think critically about what they share – and whom they're talking to.

KEEP CONVERSATIONS OPEN

Let children know they can talk to you about their online life. Avoid reacting with anger or judgement, as this may prevent them from opening up in the future. A child who feels listened to is more likely to disclose problems before they escalate.

ENCOURAGE REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS

Support children in building friendships through school, clubs, hobbies and activities in the real world. Strong offline relationships help reduce children's reliance on online platforms for social interaction, and can help them develop resilience and social confidence.

USE PARENTAL CONTROLS

Parental control settings on devices, games and apps can help manage screen time, filter out inappropriate content, and monitor activity. While no system is perfect, they provide a valuable layer of protection as children explore digital spaces.

Meet Our Expert

Gabriella Russo is a safeguarding consultant with over 30 years' experience in supporting children, families, and adults across education, local authority, and mental health settings – both in the UK (including at Parliamentary level) and internationally.

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