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.

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about

VIOLENT CONTENT ONLINE

Around 70% of teenagers say they've seen real-life violence on social media in the past year – often from as young as primary school age. Just 6% actively seek it out; most encounter it through group chats or social media algorithms. From fights and pranks to hate speech and graphic media, exposure to violent content online is more widespread – and more harmful – than many adults realise.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

MENTAL HEALTH AND TRAUMA

Children and young people report feelings of anxiety, guilt, shame or fear after seeing violent content. For some, these effects may be short term, but for those with existing vulnerabilities or past trauma, the impact can be more severe. Many also feel pressured to 'laugh off' violent content to fit in with friends, even when they find it distressing.

BEHAVIOUR CHANGES

Exposure to online violence can lead to fear and avoidance behaviours – such as skipping school or staying indoors. When children see weapons used in videos, it can heighten their perception that the world is unsafe and, in rare cases, increase the likelihood they'll consider carrying a weapon themselves, such as a knife for protection.

ESCALATION AND PARTICIPATION

Violent videos often go viral quickly. What begins as an online argument can spill into real-world fights – which are sometimes filmed and shared to gain views or status. Some children even admit to sharing or creating violent content themselves to gain attention or boost their reputation.

DESENSITISATION

Older teens may become numb to violent content after years of exposure, admitting they're unlikely to report it. Younger children also tend not to report it – usually because they don't believe anything will be done or because they're afraid of being labelled a 'snitch' by their peers.

HARMFUL IDEOLOGIES

Violent content online may overlap with racist, misogynistic or otherwise extremist ideas. These messages can dehumanise others or glorify violence as a way to gain power, popularity or notoriety. Over time, this can normalise dangerous behaviours and attitudes among impressionable viewers.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT

Not all children are affected equally. Those who are excluded from school, marginalised, disabled or neurodivergent are often more vulnerable to the effects of online violence. It's essential to consider wider context – including home life and access to safe spaces – when thinking about potential harm.

Advice for Parents & Educators

CREATE SUPPORTIVE SPACES

Many children feel adults are too busy or won't understand their experiences online. Take time to build trust through non-judgemental conversations about what they're seeing. If they don't want to speak to you directly, gently signpost towards trusted services they can turn to for support.

AVOID HARSH RESTRICTIONS

Fear of punishment is a major reason young people stay silent about violent content. Try not to overreact or threaten to take away devices. Instead, reassure children that they can speak openly and that asking for help won't get them into trouble.

KNOW WHAT'S ILLEGAL

Some violent content is simply upsetting, while other examples may be criminal or a safeguarding matter that needs reporting. Help children understand the difference by staying informed about online laws and social media reporting procedures. A useful resource is reportharmfulcontent.com.

UNDERSTAND TECH AND TRAUMA

Older children may already know how to block accounts or avoid triggering content. Help younger or more vulnerable children learn these tools and encourage habits that reduce exposure. Just as importantly, teach techniques that help them process distress – building resilience and emotional literacy for both online and offline life.

Meet Our Expert

Dr. Holly Powell-Jones is the founder of Online Media Law UK and a leading UK expert in digital safety, media law, and young people. Her PhD investigates children's understandings of risk online. She works with schools, businesses, and universities to provide award-winning education on the criminal, legal, and ethical considerations for the digital age. Visit onlinemedialawuk.com for more.

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