



Technology-Assisted Sexual Abuse

Conversations with your child about online/ technology- assisted harm



Marie Collins
Foundation



North Yorkshire
Police, Fire & Crime
Commissioner



Why do
we need
a leaflet

about
online
harm?

Most parents say they would like their children to be able to talk to them – and indeed that they talk to their children all the time! But having those ‘difficult’ conversations can be daunting and it’s hard to know where to begin. And while we want our children to talk to us, what we often mean by that is that we want them to listen to us and to our experience and wisdom. But if we want our children to talk to us, we have to take into account their perspective and be prepared to hear things we may not want to hear, or may not agree with. Only then can we have useful and productive conversations. It is possible to have open and good communication with our children – even when talking about difficult things – and to achieve this, as parents we need to shift our focus from telling them what to do to hearing what they have to say. In other words, we want to talk with them not to them.

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**Different
conversations**

**for different
times**

Ideally, talking with our children is something that happens regularly and easily, and it is worth making this a pattern for everyday life. But there will also be times when you want to raise a specific issue with your child. And then there are those times when something has happened – either because your child has made a disclosure or because you have found something out – and a conversation is forced upon you. Each of these situations requires a different approach, and it is worth having a look at them separately.





General conversations – creating conversational habits

It is good to get into the habit of creating space for conversations with your children. They are much more likely to tell you when something is wrong if they have a general idea about how you may respond. One of the biggest reasons for children not talking about online harm is fear of not being believed, or of their parents being angry or (as they see it) 'overreacting'. We therefore need to make conversations feel safe, to show respect for each other's views, and to listen as well as talk. It is not so much about you talking to them as them having the space and confidence to talk to you.

There are a number of ways to make this easier:

Build conversation space into everyday life.

As part of your normal daily or weekly patterns, build in time when your children have the space and permission to talk to you. This might be shared meal times; a few minutes at the end of the day when you say goodnight; the journey to and from school; going for a family walk. Enjoy talking about the trivial as well as the serious; seek their opinions on a range of subjects, good and bad; listen to their thoughts; be curious and interested – even when you disagree. Disagree politely and respectfully and really listen for why they hold the views they do. If you show you are available then they will know they can approach you if they need to.

Have conversations with other adults in front of them. Talk about online harm, healthy relationships, respect and consent as

part of general conversations you have with other adults that they can hear – they may or may not join in, but the message you are giving is that these things are ok to talk about and, importantly, that it's ok not to know exactly what to do in any situation. These conversations could be between you and your partner, or with a friend or the parents of their friends. In these conversations you want to be matter of fact, curious and not overly judgemental – the point is for your child to see that conversations about things like this can be easy and thoughtful. It's important to talk about mistakes you have made too – and how you moved past them. While we want to protect our children from harm, it's also important to know that mistakes can happen, risks can go wrong and there are still things that can be done and support given to help.

Show interest. You don't just want to talk with your child when something is wrong, so show interest in their lives and interests – What do

they like about TikTok? What YouTube video made them laugh today? What was their day at school like? Sometimes they won't want to talk about it and you may get the 'Mu-um!/Da-ad!' moan and not much more. But generally people like to share their enthusiasms, and if you are genuinely interested and not judgemental, they are more likely to tell you what's going on in their lives.

Respect privacy. While taking an interest is important, we also need to show that we understand their need for privacy. Being allowed to have your own thoughts, your own interactions is a human need and one that helps us stay mentally well. Our children are not our possessions or extensions of ourselves and we have no right to treat them as though they are. By backing off but reminding them that we are there if they need us, we help them develop into independent and responsible adults.

Help them develop a strong 'spider sense' for when something doesn't feel right.

Teach them that if something makes them feel uncomfortable, it's good to talk it through. The most useful protective factor for a child – or for an adult for that matter – is to have a

well-developed inner voice that tells us when something feels a bit off. This is an instinct that we can strengthen through practice and by sharing our experiences. Not every 'spider sense' will mean that something is wrong, but by noticing them and talking them through we get better and better at knowing when they are. Maintain an attitude of neutral curiosity – your child may have views very different from your own, but if you immediately disagree, you are more likely to push them away and confirm that they wouldn't come to you. Better to respond with "I'm not sure I agree, but I'm interested to know why you think that."

Remember

What it was like to be their age – on the one hand they feel sure that they know more than you, but they also value your opinion – they just may not want you to know that! By hearing your conversations about difficult topics they get to gauge your views and your reactions before they need to tell you something themselves.

"You know I nearly fell for a scamming text the other day..."

"I just read an article about online abuse/the internet/cyber security and I didn't realise that..."

Useful openers:

Use the radio/tv to spark conversation – soaps and dramas can be particularly useful ways to explore different responses to a situation. "What do you think of the relationship between [character x and character y]? Is it equal? What could they have done instead? What would you do?"

"You know, I've got a dilemma at work/with a friend that I'd like to talk through... I'd really like to know what you think."

"Have a look at this email/text –do you think it's genuine?"

If you have a particular concern you want to bring up

It's a bit different if you have concerns that something has already happened, resulting in harm to your child. In this case, we aren't wanting hypothetical or general discussions to create a feeling of space and openness – we need to find a way into a specific conversation.

If you can, pick your time to talk – can you arrange for a car drive or a walk, just the two of you? Conversations are often a lot easier if we aren't forced to make eye contact, and a journey has a natural rhythm that allows for comfortable silences, rather than feeling like an inquisition. The more comfortable they are, the more likely they are to talk to you, so if you go into their bedroom, remember that this is their private space. That may make it feel easier for them – or it may feel like an invasion. Equally, calling them into your space, whether that's a home office or the kitchen, can feel as though they've been summoned to the headteacher for being naughty. Wherever you are, make sure you get on a level with them physically – don't stand over them if they are sitting, and find a neutral space if you can.

Remember

You may get a defensive shut down from any of these openers, but your child needs take-up time too. You may need to give them time to realise that talking to you is an option. Children are often most comfortable on their phones, so you could also offer them the option of messaging you if they want to, or even text them first – that can be an easier way for them to open the conversation.

Useful openers:

"I'm a bit concerned that you've been talking to people online that you don't actually know – can we talk about it and just run through some safeties?"

"Is there anything you want to talk to me about? You know I'm here if you need me."

"I'm not feeling comfortable with your internet use at the moment and I'd really like to talk about it."

"I'm a bit worried about you – you seem a bit withdrawn – is anything going on?"

"I notice that you've been talking about x a lot and I just want to talk though what's happening so that we can keep you safe."



To check or not to check. If you think something's happened, it can be useful to ask for professional help before leaping in. If you suspect that your child has been creating or sharing images or texts that are harmful, you may be tempted to check their devices. Think really carefully before you do – after all, do you know what you will do if you find something? You may have set ground rules that you can check their phone anytime, but it will still feel like an invasion of privacy if you do as children often see this as the equivalent of reading their diary. And if you do find an image or video of them, their mortification that you have seen it may outweigh any other harm that comes from it. It is more respectful – and ultimately more effective – if you ask them to show you their phone, leaving them in control of the process. You may not find out everything, but you will have given them the space and respect that paves the way for them to come to you should they need to.

Signposting: if your child is adamant that nothing's wrong but you still have concerns,

then signpost them to places they can check. Their 'spider sense' may be telling them something is wrong, but their pride, fear, or shame may stop them talking to you. By sharing with them a range of options about what to do if they are worried, they are empowered to help themselves – but keep reminding them that should they decide to talk, you are there for them. These options may include: the Marie Collins Foundation website, helpful leaflets on online harm, the pastoral team at school, another trusted adult.



If you find out that something HAS happened

Sometimes you can't pick your time to talk, because it needs to be dealt with right away – this may be because your child comes and tells you that something has happened, or it may be because you have found out another way. Your response will be different depending on whether it's disclosure or discovery.

Disclosure:

If they come to tell you, it could be a really inconvenient time – you are just heading to work; it's the beginning of your favourite programme; you have some important work to finish. But whatever the situation, it's really important to give your child your full and undivided attention there and then. They could have been building up to this for hours and if you knock them back now it will shape the whole of the rest of the conversation. In the end, your child's safety is the most important thing and it's worth prioritising.

Hearing that your child has been the victim of online harm is never going to be easy listening – but your child will be most concerned about your reaction, so as much as possible you need to put your own emotions aside and give space for theirs. Follow the CARES model and use reflective listening skills to help (see p13 and p14). Most importantly, show them that you believe them, that they have done the right thing to come and talk to you and they are not to blame. However angry you may feel about the situation don't direct this anger at them and don't ask 'why' they did anything, as this feels like an accusation. Whatever has happened, happened, and your job right now is to listen and support.

"Thank you for coming to tell me – I know it must have been difficult."

"This is a moment in time and it will pass."

"You've done absolutely the right thing telling me. What do you want to do now?"
(What they say may be different from what you think needs to be done, but start here and then offer alternatives.)

"Tell me a bit more about that."

"How are you feeling about it?"

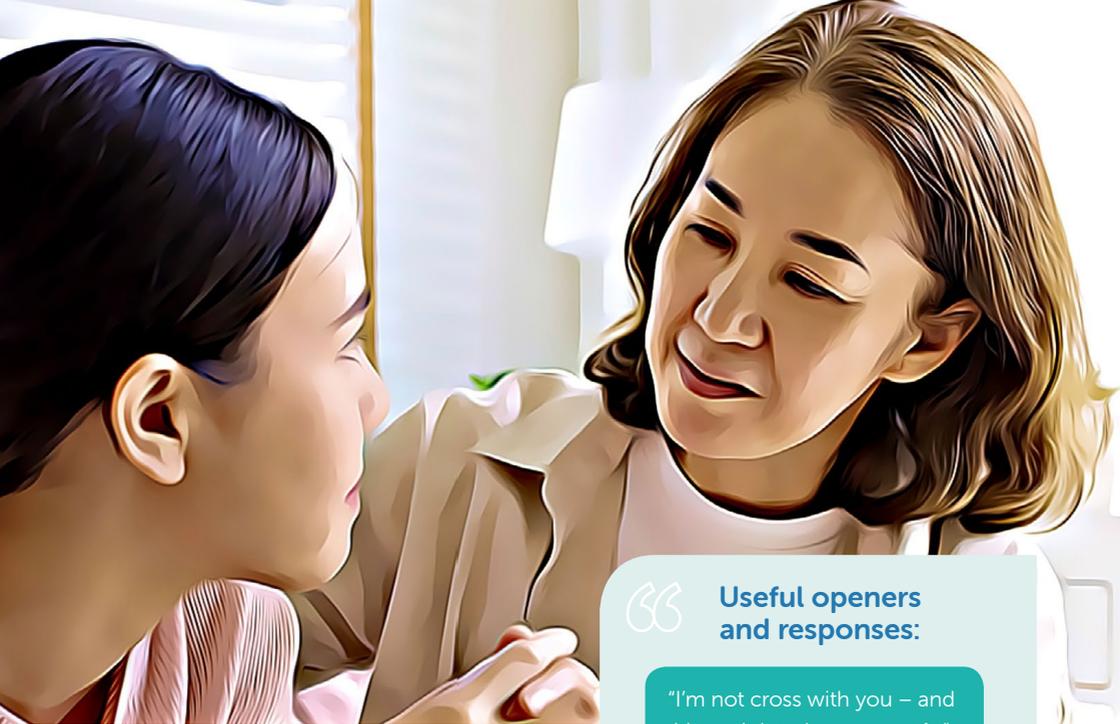
"I see – what happened then?"

Useful responses
Often these will help buy time if you are feeling shocked and emotional, but will also reassure your child that they have done the right thing to tell you:

"What's done is done – let's look at making things better."

"Whatever happens, I am completely on your side and we will find a way to get through this."

"There are professionals who know how to help – you're not the only person to have been in this situation and there are definitely things that can be done."



Discovery:

If on the other hand you have just found out and your child doesn't yet know that you have, then you may be able to choose a better time and place for the conversation. Privacy and a safe space are important if you need to initiate a discussion. You have had a chance to prepare, whereas they haven't, so they will likely feel defensive and emotional – acknowledge this and let them rant and rave or shout without joining in or arguing back.

Sometimes the discovery happens through other agencies, such as the police or school, in which case you won't have control of when the conversation happens. Again, reflective listening and using the CARES model (see p13 and p14) will help these initial conversations – the most important thing to get across is that you are on your child's side and that you will do whatever you can to keep them safe and help them move on. Remind them that you love them.



Useful openers and responses:

"I'm not cross with you – and it's my job to keep you safe."



"I've just found something out that I need to talk to you about."



"I understand that you must be feeling all sorts of different emotions right now."

"You are the most important person here and I am here to support you."



"This may be uncomfortable and I want you to know that I'm on your side."



Age appropriate language & fielding difficult questions

You know your own child and there's no objective scale of what is the right age to have any particular conversation. Every child is different and what may be appropriate for a 5-year-old in one family might not work for a 5-year-old in another. However, you can never start too soon to have conversations about respect, privacy, healthy relationships and trust. We can agonise about what to tell younger children, but in fact they are often satisfied with much less detail than we imagine.

For example "Why can't I go on that website?" – "Well, it's for grown-ups – you're not a grown-up yet." – "Oh, ok."

If, however, you do need further explanation you can turn to an analogy, such as "It's like the height restrictions on a roller coaster. If you aren't tall enough, you can't go on. Some things designed for grown-ups aren't suitable for children."

Try to avoid answers like "Because I said so" or "Because I'm your mum/dad" without giving further explanation, such as "It's to keep you safe and at the moment I can judge that better than you." Or "I understand that you don't see the reasons, but I promise you they are there and it's about keeping you safe/looking after you/helping you grow up safely" etc.

Privacy v secrecy:

Teach your child from a young age that while privacy is everyone's right, secrets imposed by others are often inappropriate. They have the right to keep their body and thoughts private but someone else telling them to keep something about themselves secret is usually not healthy or safe. Have conversations about this – when do we respect confidentiality and when is it important not to?

Children are often included in parents' secrets such as birthday presents, surprise parties, keeping Father Christmas alive, etc. **It helps if children can distinguish between good secrets and bad secrets.**

Good secrets are often like surprises: no one is being hurt and if they wanted to tell someone they could. **A bad secret** is when the child is sad or wants something to stop and they have been told they cannot say anything. It is sometimes easier to make the distinction between a secret and a surprise and what the secrecy is for. Some children need further reassurance about your response before they tell you a 'bad secret'. Older children can also feel disloyal if they tell you about concerns regarding a friend and may need reassurance that they have not betrayed a promise they made to that friend who was being harmed.

Awkward questions:

Sometimes your child throws the spotlight back on you:

For example "Have you ever watched porn?"

This is a damned if you do/damned if you don't kind of question and it's best to deflect it. Answers will depend on the relationship you have with your child – the more you talk to them generally the easier this will be. "This is not about me" works up to a point but can be seen as an admission. Without further explanation, this admission will be whatever your child chooses to see it as.

You can use the question as an opportunity to talk about healthy relationships: "It's natural to be interested in sex and sexuality – these are normal healthy things – but what isn't natural or healthy is uneven or unequal relationships and pornography can sometimes depict sex in an unrealistic way."

It's often the detail that makes a child squirm when talking to their parents – they don't really want you to share your own experiences or talk to them explicitly about sex.

"I'm sure you've come across porn on the internet, and I don't want to ask you specifics, but I would like to talk to you about what you think a healthy relationship looks like."



Another way they may throw the spotlight back to you is "But you're always on your phone!"

Tempting as it is just to respond with "That's different" or "I'm an adult" or "That's my job" it is worth a bit more reflection. Firstly, is it true? Research shows that our mobile use can disrupt parent-child interactions. The immediacy of the phone demands our attention right now and makes us less sensitive to our children's bids for attention. Children learn from what we do and say, so have a think about your own use of technology. If you expect them to put their device down when you want to talk to them, are you giving them the same courtesy? Are phones banned at the dinner table... unless you get an important call? If this rings true, perhaps you can set some ground rules between you, so that the whole family are consistent about what's expected of them.

Remember

The internet can be a useful source of information for your child – if they are curious about their own gender or sexuality, you may not have the knowledge or experience to help them work through this. And it's certain that all children will look at things online that they wouldn't want you to know about.

(As a teenager – did you tell your parents everything about your sexual identity and experiences?)

It's far more useful to instil in them an understanding of healthy relationships, equal power, consent and good communication and then let them come to you if they are worried.



Reflective

listening

Reflective listening – sometimes called **active listening** – is exactly what it says on the tin. It is listening and NOT adding any new information or opinions to the conversation.

Reflective listening is an incredibly powerful technique that helps people calm down, allows them to feel heard and enables the talker to begin to sort through their own emotions and thoughts on a subject. It also means the listener really makes sure that they know what is being said and hasn't leapt in with their own assumptions and opinions. This is more difficult than it sounds as generally in conversation we are looking for ways to bring in our own thoughts to a situation!

Listen:

Make sure you are really listening to what's being said. Any internal judgements, assumptions, advice or opinions need to be put completely aside and ignored. Listen to the words being said and listen for the emotion under them. Use lots of verbal and non-verbal cues to show that you are listening: good eye contact but not a spotlight glare; encouraging interjections: "Uh-huh"; "Go on"; "I see"; nodding; express empathy and understanding on your face.

Match and mirror:

By matching and mirroring their body language, tone and pitch of speech and the words they use, you will reassure them that you have actually heard them, and you create a safe space for conversation. Get rid of all distractions: don't have your phone out, your emails open, stop cooking dinner, get on the same level as them and make it really clear that what they are telling you is the most important thing happening right now.

How to do it

Check in:

Make sure you understand what they are saying by checking in and reflecting back or summarising what they have said: "So, you thought he was your age;" "So, this happened before x?" "So, this made you feel anxious." Allow them to put you right on any bits you hadn't understood. Reflect back emotion too – ideally using some but not all of their words: "So this really upset you." Give space for them to organise their thoughts: "Take your time; I'm listening." "Don't worry about the order just yet – just tell me as you think it."

Don't be afraid of silence – this is vital thinking time for the talker to get their thoughts in order.

Summarise:

When they come to an end, briefly summarise what you have heard. This gives them the opportunity to hear it anew and they may well have more information to add at this stage – or they may begin to get some better insights into the situation by hearing it back.

While this all sounds quite straightforward, it is worth practising reflective listening in normal conversation, as it is not as easy in the moment – especially if you have an emotional response to what you are hearing.

Using the

CARES approach

The CARES approach gives a framework for responding to difficult conversations, giving you the tools to stay calm and allow you to support your child in the most helpful way. Remember, your reaction is often what is most worrying your child. Equally, if you aren't able to do this completely, just do the best you can, when you can.

C

Calm, non-judgemental listening (see reflective listening above). Fake it if you have to! Make it clear you don't blame them. Take deep breaths, pause to give yourself space. Keep them talking while you gather your thoughts with phrases like "I see" and "Tell me a bit more."

A

Ask open questions and assess – give them time and avoid asking "Why?" as this feels like an accusation and a judgement. You can't change what has happened, so asking why they did something just gets you caught in a loop of blame and recrimination. However, you can rephrase a 'why' question to be less accusing and more open, so instead of "Why did you do that?" you could try "What led to that happening?" or "When/how did it start?"

R

Reassure and give information and support. Reassurance does NOT mean saying it will all be ok – but it does tell them that this is just a moment in time. There will be life after this. Reflect back their feelings and acknowledge how hard it must be. Take care not to trivialise here – you're not aiming for a "Come on, get over it" any more than a "This is a disaster!" You want to strike a happy medium where you acknowledge the hurt and pain while giving hope that recovery is possible and there are steps to be taken to move forwards.

E

Enter their model of reality and imagine how this feels for them. They may be talking to you, but this doesn't mean they are entirely sure that what happened was wrong. They may feel guilt and shame as well as defensiveness and desperation. There are likely to be conflicts and doubts. If they have been groomed online they may still have an emotional connection to the perpetrator. However difficult that is for us to accept, it's vital that we acknowledge it. Reassure them that you know this is difficult and complex for them emotionally.

S

Seek support and self care. Don't blame yourself; contact relevant professionals for advice. Don't worry if your child would rather talk to someone else – this is another opportunity to signpost them to support. You have not failed and responsibility for the harm rests absolutely with the perpetrator. Continue an open and accepting dialogue with your child and re-establish safety. Avoid treating your child as different because of the abuse and find ways to be a family unit again, without reference to the abuse.

Conclusion

In the end, harm can happen to anyone: any class, any gender, any background, any level of education. We all take risks and it's important to remember that the perpetrators of online harm are incredibly clever, manipulative and determined – they are to blame, not you, not your child, not anyone else. We are all vulnerable to grooming and the way to beat it is through open, honest and accepting communication, love and support. If you create positive communication patterns with your child, then you are in the best position to protect and prevent where possible, and support and recover in the event that harm occurs.



This leaflet has been brought to you by The Marie Collins Foundation and Zoë Metcalfe, the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for North Yorkshire and the City of York.

For further information on conversations with your child about online harm please visit contact us using the details below:



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