

Long Newsletter Article (400 words)

Do you know how to keep your children safe online?

During lockdown, many of us have turned to the internet to stay in touch, which goes for children as well as adults. Sadly, some criminals are using these extraordinary circumstances as a way to exploit and target young people when they are online.

Since the government restrictions were introduced Thames Valley Police have seen an increase in reports of online sexual abuse involving children and are urging parents to take this opportunity to have honest conversations about online safety with their children and to review privacy settings on the apps and social networks that they are using.

Online sexual abuse is any type of sexual abuse that happens on the web, whether through social networks, online gaming or using mobile phones. In some cases this involves children being groomed or exploited by an adult.

Any child or young person that uses the internet or has a smartphone could be a victim of online sexual abuse and they can be at risk from people they know, as well as from strangers. Those they are speaking to online may not be who they say they are.

The signs of online sexual abuse can be hard to spot and in these unprecedented times it is possible that these changes in behaviour may be mistakenly attributed to the change of circumstance or routine in which we all find ourselves.

These signs include; hiding computer screens or taking phone calls away from others, being secretive about what they're doing and who they're talking to, sudden personality changes or mood swings, engaging less with family and their usual friends and referring to a 'new friend' but offering limited information about them.

If you are concerned for the safety of a child, call Thames Valley Police on 101, or the NSPCC helpline on 0808 800 5000.

To support parents during COVID-19, the National Crime Agency's Child Exploitation and Online Protection division are producing fortnightly activity packs to help discuss staying safe online with your children. These age-appropriate resources, containing two 15-minute activities for each age group, can be found at www.thinkuknow.co.uk

Thames Valley Police continues to intercept and bring to justice those who attempt to exploit children online and encourage anyone who is concerned about the sexual behaviour of an adult or a child, to call 101 or the Stop it Now helpline on 0808 1000 900.