withersworldwide

Understanding your child's online life

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Anyone who has ever tried to wrestle an iPad or phone from the sticky hands of a child, or worse, a grumpy teenager, already knows that time spent online has overtaken television in the hearts and minds of children.

From the toddler transfixed by a game on your phone, to the 13-year-old glued to YouTube on your laptop, children around the world are drawn towards cyberspace when they're virtually still in nappies.

According to UK stats, three to four-year-olds are spending more than eight hours a week online, and five to 15 year-olds spend an average of 15 hours per week, according to Ofcom's report, Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes , published last November.

This means that internet usage among children has reached a record high, with three to four year-olds spending an hour and a half longer online each week than the previous year, and five to 15 year-olds an hour and 18 minutes more.

This presents legal and social challenges which are giving parents a major headache.

What are your children looking at? Is it harming them? And, more importantly, can you get them to tell you about it?

Thankfully, the answer is probably yes. In the UK, Ofcom's research found that *'90% of eight to eleven year olds would tell a family member if they saw 'something worrying, nasty or offensive online'.*

And there are an increasing number of resources available (online of course) to help adults explore internet issues with kids.

The Ofcom workbook, available here, designed for eight to eleven year-olds, is a good place to start. It is designed to encourage children to open up about their experiences on the internet, and it also contains some enlightening facts for parents.

Only 16% of eight to eleven year olds see things online which make them *'sad, frightened or embarrassed'*, and 21% are aware that strangers might use the web to *'find out info about them'.*

However 21% say the main thing they don't like about being online is *'people being nasty, mean or unkind to them'* and 17% *'someone pretending to be their age and try to get to know them or trick them.'*

Organisations such as Childnet.com, which works to make the internet a *'great and safe'* place for children, publish information specifically addressed to children to help them deal with online issues, such as the SMART rules aimed at primary school children and the Top Tips for 11 to 18 year olds, starting with 'Protect your online reputation: ..'think before you post'.

If you suspect your child is being bullied or exposed to inappropriate behaviour, perhaps by text, WhatsApp or Snapchat, but you don't know where to start, there are resources designed to help the generation of digital *'immigrants'* keep up with their *'digitaly native'* offspring – and so keep them safe.

For example this guide to reporting on Snapchat, which links to Snapchat's own 'Reporting abuse' shows you how to report inappropriate content – and takes you to Snapchat's dedicated 'report a safety concern' link.

Childnet contains guidance on *'Hot topics'* like cyberbullying, parental controls, sexting, gaming, online grooming and Apps.

And then of course there are the offline solutions, like strict rules around screen time and – the ultimate sanction for teenagers – device confiscation, at least unless and until the government answers the recent call of the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, to impose mandatory time limits on social media use by children.

In the meantime, you may have to lead by example!