

Stranger Danger

If I was to say that I am a 17 year old member of an up-and-coming boy-band who will be performing on 'X Factor' next year, you would be forgiven for being ever so slightly suspicious that I may not be telling the truth. That is because, being adults, we have learned to question things that we are told by strangers and treat them with a healthy degree of suspicion and scepticism.

Some teenage girls, however, have yet to gain these abilities and are naturally very trusting, unless they have had personal experiences to the contrary. These days, where teenagers have access to a variety of digital devices, such as mobile phones, tablets and laptops, it has become more difficult for parents to monitor what they do and ensure that they are not talking to, or befriending inappropriate adults on the internet. This is not made any easier by the fact that young people often engage in 'friend collecting' - the practice of asking anyone and everyone to become 'friends' on 'Facebook' etc., in an effort to appear popular.

This can be addressed by educating them about how easy it is for a predatory adult to assume a false identity online in an attempt to become their 'friend' and therefore trustworthy. Unfortunately, however, even students who have received lessons on E-safety can still be drawn in by strangers who cleverly use 'textspeak' and the 'slang' language adopted by young people to ensnare trusting teenagers. A recent report demonstrated that young people regularly make assumptions about the gender of online strangers based on the language they use and the subject matter discussed. The report highlighted that conversations about shopping or boyfriends are often enough for teens to conclude that the online stranger is female, whereas discussions about football, where perhaps swear words are used, is usually enough to prove the online acquaintance is male.

As adults we should pay attention to who our children's online friends are and show interest in any new 'friends' they may talk about. We should also ensure they have set up all of the correct privacy settings on their different online accounts.

Tips for safe social networking

- Do not give in to peer pressure or follow what other people are doing on these sites
- Be wary of publishing any identifying information about yourself, such as phone numbers, pictures of your home or school, your address or birthday.
- Use a nickname
- Set up a separate email account to register and receive mail from the site. That way if you want to close down your account/page, you can simply stop using that mail account. Setting up a new email account is very simple and quick to do using such providers as Hotmail, Yahoo! Mail or Gmail.
- Keep your profile closed and allow only your friends to view your posts and photos.
- Do not make friends with anyone you have not met in real life
- What goes online stays online. Do not say anything or publish pictures that might later cause you or someone else embarrassment.
- Learn how to use the site properly. Use the privacy features to restrict strangers' access to your profile.
- Do not believe everything you read online

Useful Websites

- Kidsmart
- Get Safe Online
- CEOP
- Thinkuknow
- Cyber Mentors