Background Information – 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 abuse regardless of their age, gender or background.

Reports of online child sexual abuse in the Thames Valley area were 146% higher in March 2020 in comparison with March 2019. We want to warn young people that those they are speaking to may not be who they say they are and to help parents and carers take action in protecting their children from falling victim to online sexual abuse.

Do you know who your children are speaking to online?

During lockdown, many of us are turning online to stay in touch and this 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.

Thames Valley Police have seen an increase in reports of online sexual abuse involving children since movement restrictions were introduced 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.

In order 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.

Children, do you know who you're speaking to online?

Staying safe online has never been more important than right now as we're all spending more time on our phones, tablets, laptops and games consoles to stay in touch and keep our spirits up.

There is a risk with social media and games that have a chat option that someone that you don't know could try to contact you, or add you as a friend or request to follow you. Remember, it's ok to ignore their message or decline their request.

Thames Valley Police know that some criminals are using the lockdown to try and make contact with young people online, build up a friendship with them and then encourage them to do things that they don't feel comfortable doing. Not everyone online is who they say they are, so don't befriend people you don't know.

Now is a good time to take a look at the privacy settings of the apps that you use. Check the default settings and make appropriate changes to keep yourself safe when you use them. Advice for over 60 of the most popular apps and games has been created by the NSPCC and O2 and can be found at www.net-aware.org.uk.

If you are unsure about someone that you're speaking to or if you see something online that makes you feel uncomfortable, unsafe or worried walk away from your phone or computer and tell an adult immediately. This could be a friend, your parent, one of your teachers, the police or Childline.

You can contact the police on 101 or by going online at www.thamesvalley.police.uk/contact and you can contact Childline by calling 0800 1111 or chat online at www.childline.org.uk.

App Information

1. Snapchat

Snapchat lets you send pictures or short videos to friends – they disappear after being viewed but can be screenshotted. Users can also post stories which can be viewed by their contacts and last for 24 hours.

Top tips for Snapchat:

- Check that 'who can contact me' is set to 'my friends' and not 'everyone'
- Check that only friends can view stories
- Turn off 'see me in quick add' so that friends of friends, who they may not know, can't add them
- Turn on ghost mode in Snap Maps so that others can't view their location

Show your child how to report content that they're not comfortable with and how to block or report users.

Internet Matters have produced a video with step by step instructions on how to check these settings.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=56&v=EWzvUFcOhF8&feature=emb_logo

2. Kik

Kik is a messaging app that allows users to send messages, pictures and videos in individual and group chats. These group chats can be private or public, and users can also video call friends in the app.

Top tips for Kik:

- Encourage them to pick a username that's hard to guess – that way people will have to ask for their username before they add them
- Discourage them from using the 'meet new people' feature which allows them to enter into anonymous, unmoderated chats with random users
- Discourage them from sharing their Kik code on other social media sites where they might have public profiles

Show your child how to report content that they're not comfortable with and how to block or report users.

Kik have produced a guide for parents: https://www.kik.com/uploads/files/Kik's%20Guide%20for%20Parents%20-%20February%202017.pdf

3. Instagram

Instagram is a picture and video sharing app. Users can post pictures to their feed or add them to their story, which stays up for 24 hours.

Top tips for Instagram:

- Check that their profile is set to private
- You can filter comments to automatically block comments or messages containing certain words
- You can also block comments from specific users
- You can edit story settings so that only selected 'close friends' can view stories

Show your child how to report content that they're not comfortable with and how to block or report users.

Internet Matters have produced a step by step guide on how to check these settings: https://www.internetmatters.org/blog/parental-controls/social-media/instagram/

4. Whatsapp

Whatsapp is a messaging app that allows users to send messages, photos, videos and their live location with individual and group chats.

Top tips for Whatsapp:

- Turn off the live location feature

- You can edit the profile picture and status settings so that these can only be seen by contacts, or by nobody
- Use the 'blocked contacts' feature to block specific people from being able to contact them

Show your child how to report content that they're not comfortable with and how to block or report users.

Internet Matters have produced a video with step by step instructions on how to check these settings.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uB00VSPUPB4&feature=emb_logo

5. Omegle

Omegle is a virtual chatroom which connects users to other users at random. Once connected, users can chat via text, audio or video.

Talk to your child about the dangers of giving out personal information such as their age, their location or their full name to people that they don't know.

Video chat has three different options – moderated, unmoderated and adult. Unmoderated and adult ask the user to confirm they are over 18, but this information is not checked.

Think U Know has produced this parent's guide to Omegle:
https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/globalassets/omegle-parents-guide.pdf

Useful Information and Links

- Thames Valley Police campaign landing page
  https://www.thamesvalley.police.uk/police-forces/thames-valley-police/areas/c/2017/hidden-harm/online-child-abuse/

- Ellie's story - An account of a victim on online child abuse that was first used in our Hidden Harm campaign in 2018.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rVx9-VnLX0

- Thinkuknow - The education programme from CEOP, part of the NCA with advice and games focusing on staying safe online.
  https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/
  To support parents during COVID-19, Thinkuknow are producing fortnightly activity packs, tailored to four different age groups
  https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/support-tools/home-activity-worksheets

- Net Aware – a collaboration between the NSPCC and O2 with advice and information on a variety of social networks, apps and games www.net-aware.org.uk

- NSPCC – adult helpline: 0808 800 5000, Childline: 0800 1111. They have received funding from the government to support their helpline during the COVID-19 pandemic www.nspcc.org.uk