

ThinkUKnow e-Newsletter - November 2015

Teasing, bullying, stalking, joking, drama, harassment, vilification...these are all terms which are used to describe similar behaviours online, but where do you draw the line between a bit of fun and something which could be quite harmful? This month, we're going to examine the issues around anti-social online behaviour, particularly around abusive or offensive communications.

It isn't all about you

When looking at various laws at the state and territory level which may be used to address anti-social online behaviour, there are some which do not require proof of intention to cause harm; the focus is on whether the victim feels threatened, menaced or harassed. This is an interesting distinction to make, as a person may feel as though they are just having a laugh, but the butt of their joke sees the situation in an entirely different matter.

There are difficulties we experience when trying to communicate online: we lose the visual cues (such as facial expression and body language), the auditory cues (such as tone and volume of voice) and the contextual cues that we have in face-to-face interactions that allow us to gauge the meaning behind someone's words, as well as how they are responding to our communications. To overcome this, some people may use emojis to convey facial expressions and emotions, but it's also a good idea to take a bit of extra care in choosing our words in digital communications. It may also be helpful to read a message or post out loud before sending it to hear for ourselves how it may be interpreted.

Not just a "young person's problem"

Anti-social online behaviour doesn't just affect children and young people, adults may experience this behaviour as well. There have been well-documented instances of adults being threatened with physical harm, rape and violence against their loved ones for speaking out about particular issues online. Although some may argue that they are just words on a screen, not knowing who is behind these words or how serious they are about following through on these threats can cause great stress, anxiety and fear.

This month, we recognise White Ribbon Day, an effort to raise awareness of violence against women and to encourage the community, and men in particular, to take action to prevent this violence. This violence is not only in the physical sense, but the psychological and emotional abuse which may be perpetrated against women and, in an increasingly connected world, may take place through the internet and mobile devices. As a community, we must not hide from this technology-facilitated violence against women but collectively make a stand and educate our children and young people so that when they are adults, they are not engaging in this type of behaviour.

Time2Talk

In this section we look at ways to start talking with children and young people about their use of technology.

How do you know if someone will be offended by what you post online?

When you are an adult, do you think you'll see more or less inappropriate online behaviour than you see now? Why/why not?

Who is responsible for eliminating cyberbullying?

What can you do if you see someone being cyberbullied?

Censor yourself vs harden up

So how do we address this anti-social online behaviour: do we force a form of self-censorship and have people overanalyse every single communication on the slight chance that it might offend someone, or do we simply accept that we are going to experience anti-social online behaviour and build a wall around our emotions so that we are not affected by someone's callous words? Neither approach is effective; instead, we need to find some middle ground. Everyone should choose their words and actions carefully online, but we can't always predict how someone will interpret our words. A few seconds of considering the impact of our words before we post them, however, can help us to avoid most incidents online.

At the other end of the spectrum, we don't need to "harden up" and become impenetrable robots without emotions, we just need to develop resilience and perspective. Sometimes, people lash out at others because they themselves are experiencing some concerns which they can't address in other ways. Surrounding ourselves with a positive support network, developing a strong sense of self-worth and having strategies such as blocking and reporting inappropriate behaviour online, can help us to develop the resilience to overcome anti-social online behaviour.

I get by with a little help from my friends

We shouldn't have to tackle anti-social online behaviour on our own, so it's important to look out for our friends online. Listening and supporting our friends can help them to overcome some of the challenges they might face online. Looking out for people we may not even know online can also help us to set the standards for the communities we want to see online and send a clear message that anti-social online behaviour of any kind should not be tolerated.