Guide to informing parents about harmful content

In this article, we explain what kinds of harmful trends and content pupils may be exposed to, either at home or in school, and how schools should broach the subject with parents to avoid exacerbating the issue.

This guide aims to arm schools with the knowledge of how to manage parents' and pupils' awareness of harmful content and help them avoid any further negative consequences. Read on for more information.

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What is harmful content?

It is not uncommon for schools to hear about harmful trends, 'challenges', hoaxes, media and videos that circulate either inside or outside of school. Harmful content can come in many forms and affect pupils in various ways. Some harmful content goes 'viral', meaning that it spreads quickly online or via word-of-mouth. This is similar to how harmful chainmail spreads.

Trends and challenges

Trends and challenges tend to spread in this viral manner, oftentimes by design. While some are harmless and designed to inspire some fun, others can be extremely dangerous and put children's lives at risk, often inadvertently. A core component of trends and challenges is that pupils 'dare' or inspire each other to complete them, often recording themselves doing so and posting the video on social media and various content sharing platforms, e.g. TikTok. Trends and challenges can catch on quickly, sometimes within a matter of days.

Hoaxes

Hoaxes are deliberate lies designed to seem truthful, and social media and other content sharing platforms provide an audience for hoaxes to spread rapidly. Hoaxes that pupils typically come across are designed to frighten them, such as urban folklore, e.g. fake serial murders, and preternatural beings, e.g. ghosts. Hoaxes can also involve invented stories about challenges and trends and encourage pupils to try the challenge for themselves to prove or disprove the hoax.

Media, videos and movies

Media, e.g. pictures, videos and movies can circulate in the same way as other potentially harmful content. This type of content is often age-inappropriate for children and may contain themes such as violence, extreme fear, sex, foul language and drug use. With content sharing

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'Naming and shaming' a website, app or other digital content often results in driving more traffic to it, causing further harm and exposure. **More on this in this guide.**

platforms and online streaming services becoming ever more attractive to children and young people, the prevalence of age-inappropriate content being shared and talked about is increasing. Pupils often spread this type of content on mobile devices or via word-of-mouth, invoking curiosity within their peers who then spread the information to others – and so the cycle of sharing continues.
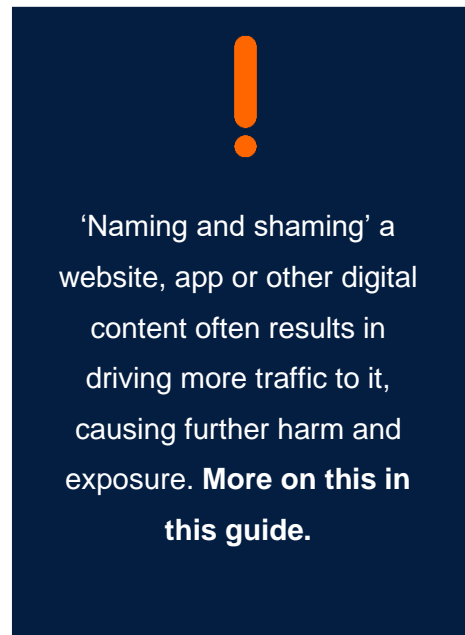
The dangers of raising awareness on harmful content

Every so often, harmful content causes a stir in the media and results in worry amongst school staff, governors, parents and pupils. This worry can be fuelled online and by news media outlets and, unfortunately, mass messaging about harmful content often has the opposite effect of preventing pupils from being exposed to it. This is sometimes coupled with misinformation about the content, fuelling further reasons for concern that may be unfounded.

Schools and parents may feel the need to spread awareness of a particular type of harmful content that is currently circulating in the digital world; however, this often causes a further spread of public attention, panic and misinformation.

Assessing the risks of raising awareness

Schools may feel compelled to raise awareness about any harmful content circulating amongst their pupils; however, sources of information are often unchecked and may even be sensationalised for the sake of drawing further attention to the content itself.

Warnings about this type of content raise the risk of pupils becoming curious and driving traffic towards the content raised as a concern, especially if they have not yet heard about it. Schools should be aware of the intent behind raising awareness and assess whether it is truly in the interests of child protection or as a result of the pressure to do what is considered the 'right thing'.

Raising awareness without the right intent, or in the wrong manner, can cause parents to feel a false sense of security towards other potential harms. For example, if parents become aware of a harmful incident on a particular mobile device app and, therefore, prevent their child from using that app, it is possible that they perceive this as resolving the issue and become complacent towards other harms circulating in the digital world. Parents should always remain vigilant for harmful content their child may be exposed to, as the digital world is a rapidly changing place and the means for their children to be exposed to harmful content is becoming more creative. Raising awareness may also have the opposite effect and cause parents to assume that accessing the internet is a negative thing, putting their child at risk of missing out on positive social interactions with friends, developing beneficial friendships, and accessing creative and learning opportunities.

Certain groups of pupils are especially vulnerable to harmful content, and this is particularly prevalent in pupils with SEND, some of whom may not fully understand the consequences of re-enacting challenges or the signs of a hoax. Schools should weigh the duty to safeguard pupils against the risk of unintentionally causing more harm before deciding if, and how, to raise awareness.

Important: It is worth noting that where harmful content is deemed to pose a significant risk to pupils' health and wellbeing, or pupils' behaviour is cause for significant concern as a result of exposure to harmful content, schools must enact their duties to safeguard pupils and should act in line with their safeguarding policies without delay.

In summary, it is not always helpful to publicise the exact harm or source of the content. The issue of raising awareness about harmful content is complicated and requires schools to fully assess the intended outcome. The following sections of this guide aim to help schools safely and effectively communicate this sensitive matter with parents should the need arise.

This guide is not intended to encourage schools to raise awareness about specific online trends, challenges or harmful content. Schools should first assess whether it is safe and necessary to do so before engaging with parents.

Communicating sensitively with parents

Avoiding negative consequences

Despite the risks associated with raising awareness about harmful content, it is still important to communicate with parents when it is in their and their children's best interests to do so. The means of engaging parents makes all the difference in each situation, and no two harms will have the same effect on members of the public. It is, therefore, recommended that schools steer away from frightening or worrying parents, spreading potential misinformation and rumours, or listing the negative associations with the internet and other digital content.

Instead, schools should ensure they focus on:

- Helping parents understand what to look out for if their child has been affected by harmful content.
- Informing them about how to start and maintain transparent conversations with their children about using the internet.
- The latest uses and functions of the internet, apps and games and how they can ensure the appropriate parental controls are in place.

How schools present this information can also make a difference and help avoid overwhelming or frightening parents and pupils. Schools should avoid releasing a large amount of information about harmful content and online safety in one go, and instead space this information out to reinforce their understanding of the school's message about child protection. Ongoing, regular information and updates may prove more effective than a lot of worrying information at once.

Schools should also keep their messaging about raising parents' awareness of online harms positive overall. Parents do need to be aware of the severity of the potential risks in the digital world in order to avoid them becoming complacent and to reinforce their role in keeping their children safe. The general message, however, should avoid sweeping statements about the internet being something that is negative, or attaching a stigma that all content sharing is harmful.

Providing practical advice to parents

Schools should help parents communicate with their children:

- That certain digital or online content is age-restricted for a reason and that this is to protect them from unsuitable content that may scare or upset them.
- That being shown inappropriate content by their peers or viewing it unintentionally will not get them into trouble.
- That they should not share or re-share inappropriate or harmful content and should instead tell a trusted adult if something they have seen is uncomfortable, disturbing, or inappropriate.
- That intentionally viewing or searching for harmful or inappropriate content is not cause for punishment, and that they should instead try to understand why their child may have sought out the content and establish better channels for asking questions in future, e.g. talking to their parent.

Schools should help parents:

- Understand the various ways they can minimise the chances of their children being exposed to harmful content, e.g. enforcing parental controls, safe search filters and pop-up blockers.
- Understand what is real and fake in terms of digital and online content, so that they are better informed to support their children in critically assessing the content they see.

A few good practice tips:

- **Encourage staff and parents to be calm, reassuring and informative when children report or ask about harmful content.**
- **If pupils have not heard about certain harmful content, avoid bringing it to their attention.**

Good practice

It is important that schools encourage parents to establish an ongoing conversation between themselves and their children about their online life. This can be through various means, such as asking their children what they enjoy doing online, joining in with their online activities, and ensuring that conversations are a regular, everyday topic.

This helps support parents to:

- Build trust with their children about their online lives.

- Identify when something is wrong.
- Keep up-to-date on their children's online activities.
- Become a first stop for their children when there is an issue or if something they have seen online upsets them.

Encouraging parents to engage in regular conversations with their child about online safety and harmful content enables pupils to develop critical thinking about what they see online or digitally. Open conversations can also help both parents and pupils identify what is age-appropriate content, spot what is real and fake, and establish ground rules. Positive messaging aims to help parents understand their role in reinforcing the school's messaging about online safety and inappropriate content, and how to use technology to enrich their children's lives in a positive way.

With the internet's offerings and digital content constantly renewing and changing, it can be difficult to keep up with everything that may or may not be harmful to pupils. That is why, in the long-term, it is more beneficial to arm parents and pupils with the knowledge to assess content critically, identify any harmful content they come across, protect themselves from future exposure and talk to the right people than it is to attempt the impossible task of raising awareness for everything that circulates in schools.

Next steps

→ **Use our good practice letter template: [Informing Parents About Harmful Content Letter](#)**

→ **View our model policy: [Online Safety Policy](#)**

→ **Invite parents to this presentation: [Online Safety Presentation for Parents](#)**

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