Helping our children manage abusive people online

Don't respond

In a world where it seems OK to criticise or abuse anyone who may disagree with our opinion, many users online just enjoy causing trouble and some are just plain horrible. Responding is a natural reaction to this behaviour but it also gives the other person what they want – knowing their actions have caused upset.

This is one of the hardest things we will ever ask anyone to do and, if we are being honest, it's difficult for most adults to do. But not responding also means that we won't get into any trouble by getting reported for posting abusive comments or saying horrible things back. Most apps and games won't always care who started it so it's good to encourage our children to be the better person.

Save a copy

This is actually pretty straightforward and will work on any app. By pushing or holding a couple of buttons on our device (just Google your device to find out how) we can permanently save a copy of comments, posts or messages. This means that our children can evidence the abusive behaviour. It can then be shared with member of staff such as teachers or headteachers and also, in extreme cases, be shared with Police – just because it happens online doesn't mean that the law will treat it differently!

A huge amount of abuse can occur over headsets while they are playing gaming as there are many gamers who are simple horrible people. While saving evidence of this can be a challenge, it is still possible. Unplugging the headset from the controller or console will allow the chat to come through the TV instead – just sit there and film it with your mobile device, allowing you to keep a copy of what is being said and how other games are interacting. Some parents and carers may be surprised by the way their children treat other gamers online, especially their friends!

Report them

All apps and games will give you the ability to report any user who breaks the rules – sometime referred to as community standards or guidelines. A few of these rules cover what isn't acceptable behaviour and language with a common theme being that no matter who you are talking to, no matter where they are from or what they believe – you should be nice. If people aren't acting nicely then you can inform the app that you feel their behaviour is not acceptable and the app will take action.

Reporting is anonymous so they won't know who has reported them and reports are viewed by a moderator (a real life person) who can then decide whether the rules have been broken and what action to take. Most apps won't tell you what they have done which can be frustrating but they take action ranging from sending a message to remind the user of the standards, removing certain features such as chatting or comment, or, in certain instances, they can ban the user for a days, weeks, months or simple delete their account. Reporting someone can help keep the internet safer for others because if they are doing to them, they may be targeting others too.

Block them

As simply as it gets, blocking will stop the user from chatting, messaging, commenting, gaming or accessing their profile. Once that button is pushed, the other users will have no way to communicate with them and is one of the best methods of keeping yourself safe from abusive individuals. Most apps will let you unblock that user, sometimes after a certain amount of time, so even if it is their 'friend' they are blocking it doesn't mean they won't be able to play with them again – this has been shown to work in a number of friendship groups as the other user is given time to reflect on their behaviour.

Blocking isn't perfect as in some apps such as WhatsApp they will still be able to be part of group chats but it can certainly be an effective way to stop the abuse the majority of times. In some cases, children may be reluctant to block users as they want to be able to see what the person is posting or commenting about them but this just makes the impact of the behaviour more harmful.

Tell Someone

This is the one bit of advice that children and young people find the most difficult – telling an adult they trust that someone is being abusive towards them online. Many children report being fearful of the consequences of telling an adult – loss of a device or use of an app – for something that isn't really their fault. An analogy we use sometime is that when a child falls off a bike and hurts themselves, we don't stop them riding the bike but many parents and carers may feel that the only way to safeguard their child is to stop them going online. It's perfectly understandable why parents and carers would do this, to remove them from the environment but it also means that children may not always report to them that they are experiencing this abuse and will simple put up with it, having a much greater impact on their well-being. As hard as it can be when your child is involved, teaching them how to manage these individuals can be a better way of keeping them safe while still allowing them to enjoy all the benefits a digital world will bring.

There are many places our children can go to talk so even if they worry about telling us as parents or carers, there are other trustworthy adults and organisations which can help them. Talking to a member of staff in school or a professional working with them can be useful, or another family member such as an Auntie or Uncle, even Grandparents, but another place they can go to talk is Childline. By ringing 0800 1111 or visiting Childline.org, they can talk to a trained individual whose only job is make them feel safer and happier, and remind them that they are not to blame for these things. Keep the conversation about the good and the bad of technology going!

internet matters.org

ChildLine 0800 1111