Why children don't talk to adults about the problems they encounter online

April 12 2023, by Andy Phippen

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

"I don't listen to adults when it comes to this sort of thing," a 17-year-old told me.

We were discussing how digital technology affects his life, as part of a long-term project in the west of England that I carried out with

colleagues to explore young people's mental health—including the impact of digital technology on their emotional well-being.

There is a widespread perception that being online is bad for young people's mental health. But when we began the project, we quickly realized that there was very little evidence to back this up. The few in-depth studies around social media use and children's mental health state that impacts are small and it is difficult to draw clear conclusions.

We wanted to find out if and how young people's well-being was actually being affected in order to produce resources to help them. We talked to around 1,000 young people as part of our project. What we found was that there was a disconnect between what young people were worried about when it came to their online lives, and the worries their parents and other adults had.

One of the things young people told us was that adults tended to talk down to them about online harms, and had a tendency to "freak out" about these issues. Young people told us that adults' views about online harms rarely reflected their own. They felt frustrated that they were being told what was harmful, rather than being asked what their experiences were.

Common concerns

The concerns the young people told us they had included bullying and other forms of online conflict. They were afraid of missing out on both online group interactions and real-life experiences others were showing in their social media posts. They worried that their posts were not getting as many likes as someone else's.

But these concerns are rarely reflected in the media presentation of the harsher side of online harms. This has a tendency to explore the criminal

side of online abuse, such as grooming, the prevalence of online pornography. It also tends to describe social media use in similar language to that used to [talk about addiction](link).

It is no surprise, therefore, that parents might approach conversations with young people with excessive concern and an assumption their children are being approached by predators or are accessing harmful or illegal content.

We have [run a survey](link) with young people for several years on their online experiences. Our [latest analysis](link) was based on 8,223 responses. One of the questions we ask is: "Have you ever been upset by something that has happened online?". While there are differences between age groups, we found the percentage of those young people who say "yes" is around 30%. Or, to put it another way, more than two-thirds of the young people surveyed had never had an upsetting experience online.

Meanwhile, the online experiences reported by the 30% who reported being upset often didn't tally with the extreme cases reporting in the media. Our [analysis of responses](link) showed that this upset is far more likely to come from abusive comments by peers and [news stories](link) about current affairs.

This disconnect means that young people are reluctant to talk to adults about their concerns. They are afraid of being told off, that the adult will overreact, or that talking to an adult might make the issue worse. The adults they might turn to need to make it clear this won't happen and that they can help.

How to help

There are three things that young people have consistently told us over the duration of the project, and in our previous work, that adults can [do](link)

to help. They are: listen and understand—don't judge.

Conversations are important, as is showing an interest in young people's online lives. However, those conversations do not have to be confrontational. If a media story about young people and online harms causes parents concern or alarm, the conversation does not have to start with: "Do you do this?" This can result in a defensive response and the conversation being shut down. It would be far better to introduce the topic with: "Have you seen this story? What do you think of this?"

Working in partnership with others, such as schools, is also important. If a parent has concerns, having a conversation with tutors can be a useful way of supporting the young person. The tutor might also be aware that the young person is not acting like themselves, or might have noticed changes in group dynamics among their peer group.

But, even if they are not aware of anything, raising concerns with them—and discussing from where those concerns arise—will mean both parents and school are focused in the same direction. It is important that young people receive both consistent messages and support. And schools will also be able to link up with other support services if they are needed.

Ultimately, we want young people to feel confident that they can ask for help and receive it. This is particularly important, because if they do not feel they can ask for help, it is far less likely the issue they are facing will be resolved—and there is a chance things might become worse without support.

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