

Keeping children safe during the Coronavirus pandemic



Avon and Somerset Police are helping to keep young people safe online during the Coronavirus pandemic, by promoting a new online safety campaign which supports parents to keep their children safe on their devices.

The NCA (National Crime Agency) and CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection) are redoubling their efforts to promote online safety messages to parents, carers and teachers and have launched a new [#OnlineSafetyAtHome](#) campaign, which hosts informative, education products for children of all ages that can be easily incorporated into home schooling.

The online world is a vital space for children at the moment, as they try to keep up with school work and maintain relationships with their peers. However, the internet can be a dangerous place for children if they are not educated on how to use it sensibly and safely. And with children spending more time in their bedrooms and parents trying to work at home, there is the chance that young people could fall victim to exploitation and bullying, which is where the new campaign can help.

It is also highly likely that child abuse offenders are spending more time online due to the lock down, in greater numbers, and research carried out by [The Lucy Faithfull Foundation](#) and the Research, Information and Communications Unit suggests that offenders are more likely to relapse during this period.

Detective Chief Inspector Larisa Hunt, lead for Operation Topaz, Avon and Somerset Police's child sexual and internet exploitation team said: "Over recent years, we have seen a continued increase

in online child abuse and exploitation and the fear is that during these unprecedented times, this will continue to rise.

“Our focus in Avon and Somerset is always on engaging with and supporting child victims of abuse and their families, as well as disrupting offenders. This is still our focus during the Coronavirus pandemic and I want to reassure our communities that we are still here, working hard to keep young people safe.

“We need parents to help too. I know this might feel like yet another thing you have to do and that parents are already juggling many tasks. And whilst it’s tempting to let your children disappear off to their bedrooms on their screens, so that you can get on with some work, I would request that you please talk to your children about online safety. Know who they are engaging with online and make sure your children understand that people may not always be who they seem to be.

“There’s also never been a better time to review your parental controls on all of your household devices.” DCI Hunt

DCI Hunt adds: “We really don’t want to alarm parents unduly. The online world is coming into its own at the moment, helping us to keep up with work, school, friends and family. There is no need to lock away your children’s screens or to scare them with stories about bad people.

“Take a look at the websites and resources available and keep the lines of communication open with your children. There is loads of advice and support for parents and young people out there.”



Child Sexual and Criminal Exploitation Prevention Officer and Co-ordinator Androulla (Andri) Nicolaou said: “It’s essential that we maintain our contact with vulnerable young people and their families and carers during the pandemic. Whilst the internet is a positive way for young people to stay in touch with each other, for education and to socialise, it also enables those who would groom and exploit them.

“Online child exploitation can include live streaming, coercion and blackmail of children for sexual or criminal purposes.

“Gangs are using social media to groom children into criminality and county lines drug dealing. The way they portray themselves online may seem glamorous to some children when they share

images of cash, expensive items of clothing or technology, using gang videos and songs. But the reality of being in a gang can be very different. Please remember there is always a way out with help.”

During the Coronavirus pandemic we have had to change our tactics to comply with social distancing. For example we are now delivering child exploitation advice sessions via Skype to professionals working closely with children, including foster carers, teachers and social workers.

Andri Nicolaou continues: “I am in regular contact with our children’s homes, to see how the children are doing and to let them know that I am still here to help. We’ve had online chats and my niece who is a dancer has even produced a dance video for young people in the homes to practise and watch. This really helps to keep those relationships going. I’m also maintaining links with schools and parents, sending them resources and speaking to them about how to spot the signs that a child may be being groomed.”

Our officers and staff are also continuing to work closely with partners through the violence reduction units (VRUs) around the force area. These multi-agency teams, usually led by local authorities, collectively work to safeguard vulnerable children and to disrupt offenders.

Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner Sue Mountstevens said: “I am extremely supportive of this new online safety campaign, especially during these uncertain times. At the moment, we are all more reliant on technology but it is important to remember how the internet can be used to commit awful crimes including online child abuse and exploitation. I encourage parents to look at the resources available and ensure children know the importance of online safety.”

Cyber bullying

Cyber Protect Officer Kristian Evans says: “Whilst exploitation, grooming and abuse may seem like the obvious dangers to children online, we should also be aware that children could be more susceptible to cyber bullying at the moment.

“Children may be feeling more anxious and lonely at the moment and will be seeking to maintain their friendships and relationships online. Whilst this is a vital channel for young people to stay in touch with their peers, they may feel unable to ‘switch off’ and could get sucked into an online world of bullying and distress.

“Again, talk to your children, show interest in what apps they are using let them know that it’s healthy to switch off their screens from time to time and to step away from the internet. We could all feel a lot better if we did this more often.

“It’s not advisable to be too heavy handed and ban children from their devices. They may not understand that you are doing this to protect them, and then if something bad does happen, they may be less inclined to come to you for help.”

Offenders

And on the subject of offenders, DCI Hunt has this message: “There are many motivations for some people to look at indecent images of children online or to have sexual communication or contact

with children online. For some who manage this with distractions such as work, family and friends, this could be really difficult during lockdown.

"If you are struggling to manage to control this or if you have noticed someone in your family become increasingly secretive about their internet use and are worried that they're looking at sexual images of under 18s you can seek advice from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation. You can call their confidential helpline on 0808 1000 900 or visit their website at <https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/>"

Top tips for keeping children safe online:

- Children should have access online to age appropriate apps / content and appropriate parental controls and supervision should be applied
- **Zip it** – Keep your personal stuff private and think about what you say and do online
- **Block it** – Block people who sent nasty messages and don't open unknown links and attachments
- **Flag it** – Flag up with someone you trust if anything upsets you or if someone asks to meet you offline.

Cyber Protect Officer Kristian Evans's top recommendations of websites and resources for support around online safety:

- **Get Safe Online** – this website covers all the key points and has an easy to use layout.
- **Common Sense Media** – this is a review site for parents by parents, to learn more about apps / movies / TV / games etc and also has reviews from young people.
- **Internet Matters** – for guides on how to enable and set up privacy settings for apps/games.
- National Crime Agency's **Think You Know** campaign has some great resources that parents can use as part of home schooling their children.