At National Online Safety, we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one of many issues which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.

What Parents & Carers Need to Know about

ECHO CHAMBERS

Digital echo chambers have become increasingly prevalent over the last half decade. Formed by a combination of social media algorithms designed to promote engagement and the basic human urge to be correct, these online environments reinforce the opinions that people already have – such as particular political ideologies – in a perpetual loop. The danger is that exposure to this constant bias can gradually nudge users towards more extreme views. That's certainly a potential hazard for young people, who tend to be more impressionable and easily influenced by things they see and read online – especially if it reflects a view they already agree with.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

EXTREME IDEOLOGIES

Echo chambers can offer routes to harmfully extreme worldviews. A typically teenage distrust of authority, for example, could spiral into a full-blown belief in conspiracy theories – sometimes rooted in ideas which are antisemitic, racist or misogynistic. For impressionable individuals who may be feeling disillusioned with life, echo chambers can often function as a gateway to radicalisation.

NO CRITICAL THINKING

While critical thinking skills are sometimes taught in schools, they are rarely domain specific. A lack of experience in thinking critically – for example, about things we see when browsing the internet – places young people at risk of falling prey to misinformation, untruths and false narratives, which are sometimes deliberately designed to mislead them and influence their thinking.

A VALUES VACUUM

If schools struggle to deliver on a clear ethos, founded in British values as outlined in the national curriculum, it leaves a space within which other ideologies have potential to flourish. Teaching about British values in more siloed experiences, such as PSHE lessons, doesn't always effectively convey the key notions: tolerance, democratic values, individual liberty and the rule of law.

UNDETECTABLE INDOCTRINATION

Many people enter online echo chambers every day without realising. It's easy to simply consume whatever's placed in front of us as we keep scrolling, unaware that we're being funnelled down a particular route. Not recognising that their daily digital diet could in fact be deeply biased in favour of one side or the other can accelerate a young person's journey towards more extreme ideologies.

LACK OF BALANCE

It's challenging to reflect on your own beliefs and opinions, and question whether you might have got things wrong. That's why most of us naturally lean towards consuming information which reinforces and underlines what we thought to begin with. The long-term consequence of this is general close-mindedness and, potentially, intolerance of a more diverse set of perspectives.

Advice for Parents & Carers

TALK ABOUT CHALLENGES

It could be helpful to explain to your child that, in general, people like to find evidence to strengthen their existing beliefs and prefer to ignore anything which supports an opposing perspective. Emphasise that it's OK if someone (politely) challenges what they think occasionally, and that any criticism of their view is purely that – a criticism of their opinion, not of them as a person.

DEBATE CAN BE GREAT

Encourage any interest your child shows in debating – whether at home, at school, or in clubs or societies. Debates require people to assess the merits of an opposing argument, so they can counter it. Putting themselves in the shoes of someone who has a different point of view is a useful way for children to approach new ideas that may contradict what they previously believed.

DISCUSS 'UNHEALTHY FEEDS'

Help your child understand how online algorithms shape which information is presented to them each day: ask them to consider *why* things appear in their feed on platforms like TikTok, Instagram or Snapchat. Explain that it benefits social media companies' advertising revenue to keep people coming back by showing them content which, generally, reinforces their existing world view.

THE VALUE OF VALUES

It can be hugely beneficial if your child recognises the importance of a core set of principles, such as the British values. By regularly tying their online experiences back to those essential ideas of democracy, tolerance and kindness towards others, understanding the rule of law and protecting individual liberties, you'll be helping them grow into a more resilient and robust future citizen.

VARY THEIR DIGITAL DIET

Sitting down to read online news stories with your child is an excellent way to demonstrate to them why it's important not to always get their information from just one place. Comparing how the same story is reported across popular mainstream publications – and talking about the political biases each may have – will highlight the importance of regularly checking a wide range of online sources.

Meet Our Expert

A former director of digital learning and currently a deputy headmaster and DSL, Brendan O'Keeffe's experience and expertise gives him a clear insight into how modern digital systems impact the experience of children, staff and parents – and which strategies help to ensure that the online world remains a useful educational tool rather than a minefield of risks.

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