**Tips to protect children from online abuse during Covid-19 lockdown**

CATS have now offered this advice on how to protect their child online during the Covid-19 crisis

**Having discussion with children about usage**

Jeffrey DeMarco said**:** “You can advise children ‘if you’re not locking your conversation when you’re talking about a new video game or making it private, strangers could come and listen and use what you tell your friends’.

“Make sure they know who is considered a stranger and a trusted adult and who isn’t.

“Focus on the positives such as it’s okay to speak to grandparents, next-door neighbours and friends of family, instead of the negatives such as all these bad guys out looking to take pictures etc.

“The key is reinforcing a more positive, supportive message instead of focusing on the risks.”

Elena Martellozzo said: “Having discussions about what is safe and what is private is the proactive way to be a safe digital parent and the reactive steps is to observe your children’s behaviour.

“We don’t want to be draconian, we want children to experience their online lives in the most positive way, particularly now that we’re locked down and that we work, socialise and learn online.

“We’re all dependent on this connectivity and children are very much the same.”

**Research the apps**

Jeffrey said: “Spend an hour playing on the new apps together, such as House Party and learn how to use its different facets, including the lock feature.

“Whilst you’re exploring these apps together, use this an anchor in a positive way to discuss potential risks.”

Elena said: “It is important to understand the very nature of these apps, how they work and how they operate, how you can block, how videos are created, and who can get into your space.

“Learn what you are allowing your child to use”

**Spot behavioural signs**

Jeffrey said: “Normally there may be a dip in your child’s energy levels, such as being less emotive than usual.

“If something bad is happening parents may be able to see increased anxiety and sadness in a child and their behaviour.

“If there’s multiple children in the house watch for secrets being passed between the kids in case they are disclosing something to each other, and notice those murmurs and whispers at the dinner table or late at night.

“While this is not necessarily a smoking gun approach to identifying the problem, these are potential indicators parents should be aware of.”

**Discuss peer-on-peer abuse** (**ie bullying, sharing of indecent images in closed groups)**

Criminologist Paula Bradbury is undertaking major Doctoral research into adolescent sexual behaviour online and ‘Outcome 21’, a discretionary tool which enables police to deal with sexting offences.

She said: “It is vital for every parent to have a conversation with their children about what is and is not inappropriate content and open that line of communication and engagement.

“Children need to know that they can come and talk to you about what they have seen or been a part of so that, as a parent, you are not in the dark about issues which may be troubling your child.

“Otherwise with peer-on-peer abuse children can often not want to worry their parents about uncomfortable issues and it’s very difficult within parental controls to regulate.

“Peer-on-peer abuse through cyberbullying and harassment is a rising concern amongst child protection agencies.

“The effects of this behaviour can be incredibly damaging and has the potential to have a significant impact upon the mental well-being of children.”

**Revisit parental controls**

Jeffrey said: “Most of these kids will be accessing the family broadband or Wi-Fi so parents should make an effort to revisit their parental controls because as the kids are in the house so much more than normal it’s more relevant than ever.

“If a kid gets bored he is going to explore and we all know you can get lost in the internet.”

Paula said: “Know your parental controls because they’re on nearly all apps and that can stop private messaging, stop strangers from communicating and can also ensure that people can’t find you within these apps without you finding them.

“So, for example, you can set up a profile for your child on Roblox or Minecraft and alter the settings so that they can enjoy playing games with a chosen group of known friends without the risk of private messages or friend requests from strangers.

“You can also lockdown on image sharing and inappropriate content.

“Know how these apps function, if your children are downloading apps and saying ‘oh it’s just a game’ then the questions must be what type of social interaction game, what is this game capable of?

“The internet is the perfect platform for hiding your identity, for malpractice such as grooming, so children need to understand who they are talking to is not who they’re talking to.

“We’re always going to portray a different version of ourselves online than we would when we’re offline.

“For most, the changes are just for a bit of fun and imagination play, for some, the purpose of image alteration is to deliberately hide behind a veil of anonymity.”