

Do you see what they see online?

Since government restrictions have been put in place, Thames Valley Police has seen a large increase in the number of reports of online sexual abuse involving children and are urging parents to take this opportunity to have honest conversations about online safety with their children and to review privacy settings on the apps and social networks that they are using.

Online sexual abuse is any type of sexual abuse that happens on the web, whether through social networks, online gaming or using mobile phones. In some cases this involves children being groomed or exploited by an adult.

Any child or young person that uses the internet or has a smartphone could be a victim of online sexual abuse and they can be at risk from people they know, as well as from strangers. Those they are speaking to online may not be who they say they are.

The signs of online sexual abuse can be hard to spot and in these unprecedented times it is possible that these changes in behaviour may be mistakenly attributed to the change of circumstance or routine in which we all find ourselves.

These signs include; hiding computer screens or taking phone calls away from others, being secretive about what they're doing and who they're talking to, sudden personality changes or mood swings, engaging less with family and their usual friends and referring to a 'new friend' but offering limited information about them.

To support parents and educators during COVID-19, the National Crime Agency's Child Exploitation and Online Protection command are producing fortnightly activity packs to help discuss staying safe online with your children.

These resources contain two 15-minute activities for four different age groups to ensure that they are age-appropriate. You can find the packs for 4-7-year-olds, 8-10-year-olds, 11-13-year-olds and over 14s at www.thinkuknow.co.uk

Now is a good time to review the privacy settings of the apps that they are using with them and explaining the importance of putting these in place. Social media and games with chat functionality can be used safely, providing the right precautions are taken. Advice and guidance for over 60 of the most popular apps and games have been created by the NSPCC and O2 and can be found at www.net-aware.org.uk