Potentially Harmful Behaviours

When developing the Online Resilience Tool, we decided to split the activities young people engage in online into 3 categories: Harmful, Potentially Harmful and Not Harmful.

But what does Potentially Harmful mean? And what should you do if you recognise a Potentially Harmful behaviour? This article will explain the categories with examples to help you understand.

What does Potentially Harmful mean?

Potentially Harmful means that the behaviour could be causing harm to the young person or someone else, but equally it could be that no one is being harmed. It's only through talking to young people that we can assess whether their behaviour is actually causing harm or not. If, after discussion with a young person you feel that the behaviour is Harmful, you should respond accordingly – see our blog on Harmful behaviours here. If, on the other hand, you think the behaviour is Not Harmful you can see some advice on how you might reinforce and provide further information here.

So let's look at some examples of Potentially Harmful behaviours and see how we might recognise and respond to them.

Examples of Potentially Harmful Behaviours

0-5 Age group - Gaming alone.
Gaming for the age group is likely to be simple, app-based games on tablets or phones. It's unlikely that a child this age will have the ability to play more complex games on consoles, especially those which require a login process. The main things to consider here are:

- Is the child left alone for long periods with the device? If the child does not have input from anyone else for long periods this could be a concern.
- Is the child easily distracted when other, real world, games are suggested? If so, this is a good sign and suggests no further intervention is needed. If the child is difficult to distract, again the parents/carers may need support around other activities.
- Is the child playing age appropriate games? Violence, sexual content and gambling would be unsuitable. On the other hand, games from Cbeebies are fine for this age group.

6-8 Age group - Ownership of a device
At this age, there are many reasons why a child might have 'own' a device. In some cases children may say a device is theirs when in fact it's a family device, which would then be Not Harmful. In other cases, a parent/carer may buy a mobile phone for a child in case of emergencies. While this should always be possible through the school, club or another adult, it may be that both the parents/carers and child feel less anxious knowing there is a phone nearby. There are a few things to check if a child suddenly begins talking about their device:

- Parents know about it - if it was given to the child by someone else, without the parents knowledge this would definitely be Harmful.
- Parental controls are set up - parents may need some advice on how to do this, in order to prevent inappropriate content appearing.
- There are appropriate boundaries around the device, such as not having it in the classroom.

9-12 Age group - Online Interaction with strangers
At this age, children may start playing online games and engaging with the online world in new ways. If a child you are supporting says they chat to strangers online you should find out:

- How this interaction happens - did they comment on a Youtube video and have someone to their comment? This would be relatively low risk.
- Are the interactions through games, and if so how much interaction is actually happens? Some games have very limited chat between players whereas others may have long voice calls as part of a campaign. Longer form interaction may be more worrying as children are likely to give more personal details this way, such as which school they go to etc.
- Are parents/carers aware of these interactions and have they spoken to these people? At this age parents/carers should have oversight of these sorts of interactions and would ideally speak to the person the child is interacting with.

13-15 Age group - Regular use of pornography
For young people this age, looking at pornography is not in itself a Harmful behaviour. You might learn about it because the young person talks to you about their concern or because a parent/carer is worried. A few things to consider are:

- How old is the young person? A 13 year old accessing pornography regularly would be more concerning than a 15 year old.
- What does regular mean to them? If a young person always looks at porn while their parents/carers go out to do the weekly shop that might not be too much of concern, whereas if they can't get out of bed in the morning without first watching porn that would be much more worrying.
- What sort of porn is it? Anything violent, extreme or illegal (eg bestiality) would require an intervention.

16-18 Age group - Meeting online friends unsupervised
Young people of this age may have made friends online in a variety of ways and there will therefore be a range of things to consider:

- How long have they known these online friends? If they've been speaking for years and have had video calls there is much less risk of harm. But even if they have met before, it would be best to meet somewhere public.
- What does unsupervised mean? Have they gone with friends (which would be relatively safe) or are they going alone (which would be much more risky)
- Where are they meeting? If they're going somewhere public and have agreed a time to check in with someone or be home it will be much less risky than going to someone's house with no idea when they'll be back.

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Hopefully, looking at these examples of things to consider you have a better idea of how you might approach dealing with a Potentially Harmful behaviour. You may have even thought of other questions for each example, and that's great – the idea is to have a conversation to help you assess the risk.

If you decide the behaviour is Harmful you may need to discuss what to do next with your safeguarding lead (check out our blog on Harmful behaviours for more examples of interventions). If you decide the behaviour is Not Harmful you can still take the opportunity to discuss potential risks and support with the young person (or check out our blog on Not Harmful behaviours for more examples of ways to positively reinforce this sort of behaviour).

If you want to know more, we've got a podcast all about Harmful behaviours (or a short one if you don't have that much time), just click on Digital Podcasts under the Digital Resilience menu.

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