**Keeping a safety net around children in Kent**

Kent Police is urging parents to look out for the signs of online grooming as children and young people in Kent spend more time at home.

The Covid-19 worldwide pandemic means that children who would normally be visiting friends and family or attending school around the county are now in lockdown and may be searching for things to do to keep them occupied.

With more people turning to the internet, Kent Police is reminding everyone of the steps that can be taken to keep young and vulnerable people protected from online abuse.

Detective Chief Superintendent Andrew Pritchard at Kent Police said: ‘This is an extremely worrying time for families who may be feeling anxious and dealing with new and difficult living situations. As a result it may be harder than usual to spot the signs of online abuse.

‘Whilst there is nothing to suggest more children are being groomed at this time, there is a potential for more young and vulnerable people to fall victim to predators who may take advantage of the health crisis and seek to enter homes without leaving their own.

‘Keeping children and vulnerable people safe is a top priority for us and significant resources are dedicated to tackling this issue. As the public continues to play their part in social distancing and saving lives, we will remain committed to keeping people safe both outdoors and at home.’

It is important that children using mobile phones, tablets and computers know what is right and what is wrong especially when using instant messaging services. They should only ever be speaking to people they know personally and report anything suspicious to their parents or the police.

Check what restrictions are in place, most devices or internet access will have parental controls available. Ask your child to be open and honest with you about their passwords and profiles.

Parents should talk about the risks when uploading and sharing private information as you can never be sure whose hands it will end up in or who can see it.

DCS Pritchard added: ‘We have invested in educating young people about online dangers and the chances of a real child meeting someone they’ve met online and becoming a victim of this sort of offence is extremely low.

‘Rest assured the force has specialist detectives who are trained to work in this field and have the skills and resources needed to carry out investigations in the most appropriate way.

‘It is important we all continue to do our bit to keep children safe, not just at this unprecedented time but always.’

Further advice

• Speak to your children. Understand the capabilities of the devices they use, and the websites that they use.

• Keep the computer in a communal room. Explain to them the dangers of talking to strangers; whether that be in ‘real life’ or on the internet.

• It's important that online privacy settings are checked regularly especially when updating apps – the same applies for location settings too.

• Encourage the use of strong passwords such as three or more random words or capital letters, numbers and symbols.

• ‘Stranger danger’ is as relevant on the internet as it is on the streets. You should not speak to strangers and we encourage children to raise any concerns with their parents.

• Only speak to people you know and have met. Don’t accept social media requests from people you don’t know.

For more advice or to report online abuse visit <https://www.kent.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/caa/child-abuse/online-child-abuse/>