

Supporting Boys in the Digital Age: Guidance for Parents and Carers

The Netflix series *Adolescence* has sparked important discussions about the challenges facing young boys and men today, particularly in relation to toxic masculinity, incel culture, and online radicalisation. The series tells the story of a 13-year-old boy who becomes involved in a tragic incident after being influenced by harmful online content, highlighting how young people—especially boys—can be drawn into dangerous online spaces.

Due to the popularity of this series, I thought it would be worth writing to you to reinforce the importance parents and carers play in guiding their children through the digital world. Below are some key strategies to help support our young men and mitigate these risks:

1. Stay Actively Engaged in Your Child's Digital Life

Jack Thorne, co-creator of *Adolescence*, has stated that he will withhold smartphones from his own son until at least the age of 14 to limit exposure to harmful online content and the pressures of social media. We know some parents in our community have chosen to give their children basic phones that do not allow access to social media, but we also recognise that for the majority of our parents and carers the latest devices with access to tracking apps as well as capacity to complete homework and study are often the most appealing option.

If your child does have a smartphone, consider the following steps:

- Have an open-phone policy – regularly check messages and social media to see who they are communicating with.
- Limit access at night – keep phones and other devices downstairs overnight to reduce social media use at bedtime.
- Talk to them about their online presence – ask what apps they use, check the privacy settings they have, and who they interact with.
- Educate yourself – learn about online subcultures that may promote harmful ideologies, such as incel forums, so you can have informed discussions.

2. Teach the Importance of Healthy Relationships

The charity Everyone's Invited has highlighted how toxic behaviours can emerge at a young age. For students in Key Stage 4 we have already begun to address this with Everyone's Invited guest speakers visiting school to open up conversations related to these issues. In the wider school we are using the Spring term to focus on developing positive and healthy relationships through PSHE and the weekly Safeguarding Education programme. As a parent or carer we are also encouraging you to have open conversations about respect, consent, and appropriate interactions to help your child develop a healthy understanding of relationships. For example:

- Normalise discussions about respect and boundaries
- Teach your child that consent is not just about sex - it applies to personal space, sharing information and emotional boundaries
- Use age appropriate examples - hugging a friend, borrowing something from a peer.
- Discuss media portrayals of or masculinity in films, music and social media
- Challenge harmful attitudes - e.g. *boys will be boys*
- Teach your child that real strength comes from respect and empathy and not dominance or control.

3. Encourage Critical Thinking About Online Content

Engaging in open discussions about the potential dangers of online material—including the spread of misogynistic ideologies—can help raise awareness and promote independent thinking. Encourage your child to:

- Be skeptical, not cynical – Ask: Who wrote this? Why was it written?
- Recognise bias – Not everything online is true, and even reputable sources can have an agenda.
- Spot manipulation tactics – Identify clickbait headlines, emotionally charged language, and confirmation bias.
- Be aware of AI-generated content – Show them how to fact-check claims using multiple sources before forming an opinion.

4. Provide Positive Male Role Models

Boys need strong, positive influences in their lives. Fathers, grandfathers, uncles, male carers, teachers and mentors can all model empathy, respect, and emotional expression to counteract the pressures and messages our boys are receiving from social media and society which suggest that in order to be masculine there needs to be aggression or that their emotions should be hidden and suppressed. Many of the messages our boys are receiving online suggest that by sharing their feelings they are acting in an “unmanly” way. Without positive role models and our challenge of these attitudes it only makes the negative online voices louder.

Need Further Support?

If you are concerned about your child’s online activity or any views they have expressed, please contact their Head of Year or a member of the Safeguarding Team. We are here to support you and can signpost you to further resources if needed.

By working together, we can help our young people navigate the digital world safely and confidently.

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