A How Not To Guide on Teaching Children about Internet Safety

The video 'The Dangers of Social Media" by Coby Persin has gone viral with 29 million hits. Supposedly, this video was created to teach parents how easy it is for a pedophile to groom a teenage girl. Instead, it's a how to manual on publicly shaming and blaming three teenage girls.

We won't be linking the video as there is enough details for those living near the girls to identify them as they only have their faces pixelated. In two videos, the parents' faces are shown. In all three, you can see the front door of their house. There is footage shot of the local neighbourhoods. Persin also names a park which is "the closest park" to one of the girls. Whilst we cannot identify their homes, these details make it fairly clear to anyone in the local area which 3 girls were targeted. There is absolutely no excuse for these types of identifying details to be shown. It puts the girls at risk of bullying by peers and, potentially, being targeted by child sexual abusers who live and work in their neighbourhood.

First, as we've mentioned on numerous occasions, the term pedophile has a [specific clinical definition that refers to the sexual abuse of children](#) who have not reached puberty. The vast majority of child sexual abusers and rapists (of children up to age of 17) do not meet this clinical diagnosis. These men are just as likely to be the child's father as their uncle, doctor, teacher, or policeman. Child rapists are *normal* men who make a choice to harm a child.

The reinforcement of the ['stranger danger'](#) myth is another major issue. As we wrote in an article in [the New Statesman](#) two years ago:

(t)eaching children to differentiate between 'unsafe' and 'safe' adults gives them a space to talk, to be believed, and protects them more than any blanket 'don't talk to strangers' message ever will.

Statistically, children are much higher rate of experiencing domestic violence from their father - whether this be physical, emotional and sexual abuse they experience themselves or witnessing the abuse of their mothers. Fathers, brothers, cousins, grandfathers, uncles, and stepfathers are far more likely to sexually abuse a child than a stranger. If we focus on 'stranger danger', we ignore the majority of men, and most child sexual abusers are male, who are actually a danger to their children. This isn't to say we pretend that strangers never harm a child; rather that we need to understand risk and help children develop the skills to keep them safe. Pretending that the only person who is a child rapist is a creepy man in a trench coat makes it difficult for children being abused within their family to access help.

Children also need to be taught about consent starting as toddlers. One easy way to do this is with tickling. If a child squeals no, stop. Ask them if they want you to continue tickling. If they want to continue, keep checking throughout the game. Another way is by asking children before you hug or kiss them. Granny might want a hug but a child shouldn't feel pressured into a hug if they don't want to. Doing this teaches children that they have the right to bodily integrity and that the word no has a real meaning. They don't have to kiss, hug or touch anyone they don't want

to.

We need to give children the language to access help. We need to use the appropriate words for body parts like vulva and penis. Insinuating these are 'naughty' words makes it more difficult for children to ask for help when experiencing abuse.

Rather than going for scare tactics like Persin does in his video by having parents dress up in skeleton masks and drag their kids into a van, we need to teach children the skills to negotiate world where a large number are at risk of experiencing domestic and sexual violence and abuse. A member of our team has undergone the protective behaviours training which is a program developed for people working with children so they can teach children how to manage risk, feel safe and be confident speaking out and asking for help. This is a brief synopsis of the training:

1. We all have the right to feel safe, all of the time.

Children need to be taught about risk, managing risk and being safe. Teaching them about safety means talking about feelings and emotions, and how those affect our physiological responses – something as simple as 'tummy butterflies' indicating that we are excited, nervous or anxious, for instance. Indeed, ignoring our physiological responses when we are unsafe is an issue for both children and adults. We ignore those 'early warning signs' for many reasons, one of them being mistrust in our body responses because we don't understand them. We don't understand them, in turn, because nobody teaches us to.

2. Nothing is too awful, or too small, that we cannot talk to someone about it.

Protective Behaviours works on the basis that a child can talk to someone who makes them feel safe. Because without knowing what 'safe' is, children may not talk to anyone.

Once children understand how their physiology helps them understand their emotions, they can get help to be safe. Arbitrary decisions based on 'strangers' or people close to them are useless - in fact, they could be dangerous. This is because strangers are often those people who can help: a voice on a helpline, a social worker, a police officer, a support worker. How do we teach children to differentiate between 'adults who will help keep them safe' and 'strangers'? Without giving them the skills to understand their own right to safety and what it feels like, we can't.

Teaching children to be safe also requires teaching them the skills to negotiate the internet, social media, and gaming. Banning social media until the age of 13, as Facebook does, and then expecting children to be safe online is simply ridiculous. How are children meant to differentiate between unsafe and safe adults when their parent has 900 'friends' on Facebook? If we depend on 'stranger danger' myths, do these 900 adults then become safe because their parent knows them? Equally, if we tell children not to talk to strangers but allow them uncontrolled access to X-BOX Live to people 'known' to the family, then how are children meant to recognise that the older boy from down the road is actually unsafe?

More importantly, shaming is not an acceptable teaching technique. Publicly shaming your child

will not encourage them to have open and honest dialogue with you. It teaches children that their parents are more interested in the performance of 'safety' than their actual safety. It makes it impossible for children to ask for help when being bullied at school, never mind when experiencing abuse by a family member.

Parents need to take more responsibility for helping their children develop the skills to negotiate social media and gaming safely. They need to learn the the privacy tools on Facebook, how to block people on X Box Live, and the difference between SnapChat and Instagram to start. Parents also need to learn how to talk to their children about bodies, consent and what is and is not appropriate. Signing your child up to be publicly humiliated by some dude on the Internet does none of this; nor does banning the Internet.

These are incredibly difficult conversations to have but these are the conversations that will help children feel safe, give them the skills to deal with unsafe people and navigate the Internet. This is what child protection should start with: teaching children their emotions are valid and that they have the right to say no.