SAFEGUARDING UPDATE - WHAT DO PARENTS AND CARERS NEED TO KNOW

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The manosphere and online misogyny: What parents and carers need to know

Children and young people are increasingly exposed to online messages about masculinity, relationships and gender. Some of these messages can promote harmful stereotypes, disrespect towards women and girls, and unrealistic expectations of how boys and men should behave. Understanding these influences and keeping conversations open at home can help parents and carers support their children to develop healthy attitudes and respectful relationships.

New research published in The Lancet on 31st October 2026 has raised concerns about the influence of online communities known as the 'manosphere'. Researchers are calling for greater awareness of how harmful online messages can affect young people's emotional wellbeing, relationships and behaviour.

Although these influences are often associated with teenage boys, children of all ages and genders may encounter this content through social media, gaming platforms, video-sharing sites and online discussions.

What is the manosphere?

The 'manosphere' is a term used to describe a collection of online communities, influencers and websites that discuss masculinity, relationships and what it means to be a man.

Not all discussions about men's experiences or wellbeing are harmful. However, some online personalities promote negative attitudes towards women and girls, encourage boys to see relationships as a competition for power or suggest that men should dominate or control others. These messages are sometimes presented through humour, motivational videos, fitness advice or content about becoming successful and confident.

This can make harmful messages difficult for children to recognise, particularly when they are mixed with seemingly positive advice about confidence, friendships or self-improvement.

Why might children be influenced by this content?

Growing up can be challenging, particularly when children are developing their identity, friendships and understanding of relationships. Some young people may be drawn towards online influencers who appear confident, successful or popular, especially if they are experiencing loneliness, low self-esteem, rejection or difficulties fitting in.

Social media platforms can also recommend similar content based on what children watch, like or share. This means that a child who initially watches an innocent video about fitness, gaming or confidence may gradually encounter more extreme or harmful messages.

Repeated exposure can make certain attitudes appear normal or widely accepted, even when they promote disrespect, inequality or unhealthy relationships.

It is important to remember that watching this content does not automatically mean a child agrees with it or will behave harmfully. What matters is helping children question what they see and understand the difference between healthy confidence and attitudes that undermine others.

What signs should parents and carers look out for?

There may be changes in children's language, attitudes or behaviour that suggest they are being influenced by harmful online messages.

These might include:

- **Making increasingly negative or disrespectful comments** about women and girls.
- **Repeating phrases or opinions** from online influencers without understanding their meaning.
- **Suggesting that boys or men should have more power** or control in relationships.
- **Dismissing sexist jokes, bullying or sexual harassment** as harmless fun.
- **Becoming unusually secretive or defensive** about online activities.
- **Expressing unrealistic expectations** about appearance, masculinity, popularity or relationships.
- **Showing changes** in confidence, friendships, emotional wellbeing or behaviour

These signs do not necessarily indicate a serious problem. However, they may provide an opportunity to start a conversation and understand what your child is experiencing online.

How can parents and carers help?

1. Keep conversations open and judgement-free - Ask your child about the influencers, videos and online personalities they enjoy watching. Show an interest in what appeals to them and encourage them to explain their views. Rather than immediately criticising an influencer, try asking questions such as, "What do you think about what they're saying?" or "Do you think that is a fair way to treat someone?"

2. Help children question what they see online - Explain that influencers may deliberately share controversial opinions to attract attention, increase views or make money. Encourage children to think about whether online messages are respectful, accurate and fair, and whether they would accept the same behaviour in their own friendships or relationships.

3. Talk about healthy relationships and respect - Use everyday opportunities to discuss kindness, equality, boundaries, consent and how people should treat one another. Help children understand that confidence and strength do not involve controlling, intimidating or disrespecting others.

4. Support children's confidence and sense of belonging - Positive friendships, supportive adults, hobbies and opportunities to succeed can help children feel valued and connected. Boys in particular may benefit from reassurance that it is normal to experience sadness, insecurity, rejection or uncertainty, and that asking for help is a sign of strength rather than weakness.

5. Take an interest in online activity - Explore privacy settings, parental controls and the platforms your child uses. Encourage them to tell you if they encounter content that makes them uncomfortable or promotes harmful behaviour. Remember that parental controls can help reduce exposure, but regular conversations are equally important.

6. Work with your child's school - If you notice concerning changes in your child's language, attitudes, relationships or behaviour, speak with their school. Schools can provide guidance, reinforce positive messages about respectful relationships and offer additional support where needed.

What if my child is already watching this content?

Discovering that your child follows a controversial influencer or watches misogynistic content can be worrying, but responding calmly is important. Avoid immediately blaming or shaming them, as this may discourage further conversations.

Instead, try to understand what they find interesting or appealing about the content. They may be attracted by messages about confidence, success or belonging without fully recognising the harmful attitudes being promoted.

Discuss particular messages together, challenge inaccurate or disrespectful claims and help your child consider alternative perspectives. If your child appears distressed, increasingly isolated or begins displaying harmful behaviour towards others, seek advice from their school or an appropriate support service.

The key message for parents and carers

Online misogyny is not just about what children watch on their screens. It can influence how they see themselves, how they treat others and what they believe healthy relationships should look like. Parents and carers play an important role in helping children recognise harmful messages, develop confidence, respect differences and build positive relationships.

The aim is not to make boys feel that masculinity is something negative, but to help all children understand that kindness, equality, emotional wellbeing and mutual respect are important qualities for everyone.

By showing an interest in children's online experiences, keeping conversations open and working together with schools, families can help children navigate online influences safely and confidently.

Free resources for parents and carers

NSPCC – Online safety: Free advice and practical guidance to help parents and carers understand online risks, recognise harmful content and support children to stay safe. Includes information about social media, online relationships, inappropriate content and how to have open conversations with children about their online experiences.

Find out more:
https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/

Internet matters: Online safety and harmful online influences: Free resources to help parents and carers understand the online world children are growing up in, including online misogyny, harmful influencers, gender stereotypes and the influence of social media. Provides practical advice about recognising concerning content, encouraging critical thinking and talking to children about respectful relationships.

Find out more:
https://www.internetmatters.org/

Childline - 0800 1111: Support for children and young people: Free, confidential advice and emotional support for children experiencing worries about online content, friendships, relationships, bullying or their mental health. Children can speak to a trained counsellor about anything that is troubling them, including harmful online influences or pressure from others.

Find out more:
https://www.childline.org.uk/

UK Safer Internet Centre: Advice for parents and carers: Free guidance and practical resources to help families understand online influences, social media, harmful content and digital wellbeing. Includes advice about influencers, misinformation, parental controls and encouraging children to think critically about the messages they encounter online.

Find out more:
https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/parents-and-carers

CEOP Education: Supporting children to stay safe online: Free, age-appropriate resources and guidance from the National Crime Agency to help parents and carers talk to children about online relationships, inappropriate content and potentially harmful online interactions. Includes advice about recognising concerns, starting difficult conversations and accessing support.

Find out more:
https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/parents/

UK Safer Internet Centre: Understanding online influencers: Free advice to help parents and carers understand how online influencers can shape children's opinions, attitudes and behaviour. Offers practical suggestions for discussing whether the content children watch is a positive influence and helping them question messages they encounter online.

Find out more:
https://saferinternet.org.uk/blog/safer-internet-day-2024-free-advice-for-parents-and-carers

CEOP Education: Parent and carer help sheets: Free downloadable guidance for families with primary- and secondary-aged children. Provides practical online safety advice, age-appropriate conversation starters and activities to help children recognise risks, make safer choices and feel confident seeking help when something online worries them.

Find out more:
https://prod.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/resources/parent-and-carer-help-sheets/