At National Online Safety we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information they need to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one platform of many which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.

Social media influencers are people who have established credibility in a specific industry and have the power to influence other people's decisions. Most commonly associated with YouTube and Instagram, 'influencers' will usually have a large number of followers and be viewed as authentic by their audience. It is for this reason that many influencers are often paid by big companies to promote their products in the hope of persuading their followers to purchase those goods.

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What parents need to know about SOCIAL PRESSURES LINKED TO 'INFLUENCERS'

AN UNREALISTIC PERCEPTION OF BODY IMAGE

Some of the most popular social media influencers often depict themselves as having the 'perfect body' and are paid to promote items such as health supplements or swimwear, which young people believe can help them achieve the same look. What is not always realised is that these images can be edited or filtered and aren't always a true-life representation. Your child may feel like this is what they need to look like and in some cases, become obsessed with their body image, which could contribute towards a lower self-esteem or even becoming depressed if they can't achieve the same look.

BECOMING UNREALISTIC ROLE MODELS

As children become more and more involved on social media and identify who their favourite people are to follow, they may come to see social media influencers as role models, particularly if they are attracted by the lifestyle they see online. This could lead them into developing potentially unrealistic expectations of life and in some cases, using their role models as an escape from reality, particularly if they feel like they're own life isn't very fulfilling.

ENCOURAGING BAD HABITS

Although many social media influencers will get paid to advertise brands and their products, they will also post their own material online too, usually depicting their daily life or an activity for example. This may have both desirable and undesirable consequences, with influencers able to inspire both good habits, such as healthy eating, exercise or kindness. However it may also encourage children to adopt bad habits, such as drinking, smoking, swearing or even criminal behaviour, particularly if these are seen to be endorsed by the influencer.

THE NEED TO HAVE EVERYTHING

Many social media influencers will take photos or videos of themselves wearing the latest fashion or jewellery which companies want them to promote. They may also be provided with the latest gadgets to promote or, if they are children, toys to play with in order to persuade their followers to purchase them. Many children will be keen to buy these items in order to keep up with the latest trends however if they get left behind, they could be made to feel inadequate or inferior by other children who do have them.

AUTHENTICITY OF ENDORSEMENTS

Social media influencers hold a lot of persuasion with their audience and are often looked up to by younger followers. Many children will see them as credible, authentic and trust what they see online. However, some influencers may not always believe in the product they are promoting and therefore can mislead their followers, abusing their level of confidence in them. Your child may therefore find themselves looking up to people who are disingenuous or who feign interest in activities that they themselves do not actually care about.

National Online Safety
#WakeUpWednesday

Safety Tips For Parents

FOLLOW WHO THEY FOLLOW

A good way to see first-hand who may be influencing your child is to create your own social media account and follow the same people they do. This will give you a strong indication of what is shaping how your child behaves, what they like and what they are taking an interest in.

TALK ABOUT ROLE MODELS

Role models can play an important part of your child's life, particularly outside of the home. Talk to your child about who they look up to and why. Remind them that not everybody online is who they seem to be and if you do have concerns that your child is being negatively influenced, work with them in finding more positive alternatives.

BUILD THEIR SELF-ESTEEM

It's important that your child is aware of how unrealistic perceptions of life can be depicted on social media and that it is easy to be deceived. Discuss with your child how images can be heavily edited, cropped or manipulated to create artificial scenarios and that often the lifestyle that people display on social media isn't always realistic or in fact the truth.

DISCUSS REALISTIC VS UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

If you notice your child has suddenly taken a strong interest in the way they look, or you find they are a lot more body conscious, then it's a good idea to speak to them about why they feel that way. If they seem unhappy, try to build their self-esteem by talking to them and listening to their concerns, helping to build their confidence through praise and positivity. Remind them that looks aren't everything and not everything they see online is actually a true depiction of real life.

ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENT THINKING

Social media influencers can be quite powerful individuals who hold a lot of persuasive power so it's important to encourage your child to think independently about everything they see and engage with online. Talk to them about the dangers of blindly following others and in keeping an open mind when viewing content. Teach them to always question people's motives online, especially when they see individuals are promoting a brand or product which they are likely to have been paid to advertise but may not necessarily personally endorse.

Meet our expert

Pete Badh is a writer with over 10+ years in research and analysis. Working within a specialist area for West Yorkshire Police, Pete has contributed work which has been pivotal in successfully winning high profile cases in court as well as writing as a subject matter expert for industry handbooks.

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