Guidance for parents on safe and responsible use of the Internet

Guidance Note C01/17

25th April 2017

Responsibility

When assessing the potential dangers which children are faced with when using the Internet, the GRA is of the view that it must look at all possible angles and offer advice on how parents and guardians can provide their children with the right advice for them to enjoy the Internet safely and responsibly.

History

Only a couple of decades ago, smart devices were not yet available and computers were expensive and not as widespread as they are today. At the time, these devices were limited to business and professional use, meaning that children were less likely to have regular contact with such devices and therefore less likely to be exposed to the dangers which we associate them with today.

Nowadays, however, the majority of children are just as tech savvy and computer literate as adults. Furthermore, the majority either own a smart device or use their parents' devices regularly to browse websites, communicate with friends, play games or access the millions of applications (apps) available.

The GRA is not qualified to, nor does it intend to, provide strict advice or rules on the recommended minimum age for use of smart devices. Neither is it suggesting the level of protection, if any, that parents must be putting in place for safe and responsible use of smart devices on the Internet.

Its role in this regard is limited to raising awareness of the potential dangers, what factors to look out for and what they can do to protect their children, should they wish to do so.

How young is too young?

Without getting into the possible psychological effects of excessive use of portable devices on young children, the choice and responsibility falls on the children's parents. It is up to parents as legal guardians to act in the child's best interest and make decisions on their behalf.

Unsurprisingly, there is plenty of information available online for parents to refer to and we would suggest that parents at least consider the information which has been collected by reputable sources, regardless of how impacting some of the stories and statistics might be.

Parents and guardians are free to decide if their children are allowed to use smart devices at home.

If parents allow their children to do so, are they preparing their children for what they might encounter online?

A phased approach, mindful of the child's age and maturity, may be the most sensible way of deciding if and how your children are going to use smart devices. However, should this be a one-off conversation or is it more sensible to adjust your advice as they get older? Consider that as children get older and become teenagers, their ability to explore the Internet increases and so will their curiosity.

If for the sake of this exercise, we divide children into two general groups, younger children (up to age 12) and teenagers (age 13-17) we will find that generally, younger children are likely to require more detailed guidance and stricter supervision than teenagers, despite them mostly being "observers" to online content by browsing and watching videos or playing games.

On the other hand, although perhaps more able and better prepared to face the potential dangers on the Internet, teenagers are more likely to interact with others online, rather than simply browse or watch videos, thus exposing themselves to additional risks. Taking the view that teenagers are old enough to make their own decisions might not be in the child's best interest and ultimately irresponsible.

It should be noted at this point, that we are not proposing that parents impose an Internet ban and prevent their children from using the internet as a means to protect them from all dangers. On the contrary, we believe that the Internet is a very strong educational tool and can be used in a positive manner, with, that is, the right guidance.

It is the parents' responsibility to determine;

i)   how well prepared their children are to deal with the potential dangers that may encounter when using these smart devices online

ii)   what restrictions (if any), they should put in place to limit their children's exposure to these dangers and,

iii)   whether or not their children are old enough to use these devices in the first place

Most, if not all of us, know a child like the young girl in this picture, playing on a smartphone or tablet.

Given her apparent home surroundings, it is reasonable to assume that this child seems to be in a relatively safe environment.

However, we have to ask ourselves, is she as safe as she seems?

So what are the potential dangers our children could face when browsing the internet or interacting online?

1. Pornography – Warping the minds of youth

At the time of writing this, according to Covenant Eyes (Internet filtering experts), almost 5 Billion online searches for porn were made since the start of 2015. Furthermore, in 2017 a 30% increase of people accessing adult content from their phones or tablets is expected, compared to 2013.

2. Sexting – The unsafe 'safe sex'

Sexting is sending or receiving nude or partially nude photos or videos through the Internet or cell phones. When teens engage in this risky behaviour, many things can go horribly wrong. These images are easy to forward on to others. At times, these images can be considered "child pornography," and around the world some teens have been prosecuted as a result.

3. Cyberbullying – The mean way kids treat each other online

Bullying happens on both the playground and in the digital world. Hurtful words are exchanged. Rumours start easily and spread quickly. Profiles and e-mails are hacked. Unfortunately, these types of activities are common today.

4. Predators – Those seeking to ensnare our children

The Internet is a perfect forum to meet new people, but some with malicious intent can use it to "befriend" your child. Internet predators are expert manipulators, able to foster a relationship of dependence with a teenager. Most prey on a teen's desire to be liked, their desire for romance, or their sexual curiosity. Often a predator "grooms" a child through flattery, sympathy, and by investing time in their online relationship. These can then turn into offline relationships or, in extreme cases, opportunities for kidnapping or abduction.

5. Gaming – More risks of exposure to sexual media and interactions

While online and console games can be fun, educational and interactive, there are also hidden dangers. Much of the content of some games include sexual content, violence, and crude language. Plus, Internet-connected games enable kids to interact with strangers, some of which can be bad influences or mean your kids harm.

6. Social Networks – Redefining privacy

Social networks like Facebook are very popular online activities. However, parents should be aware of the image their teens are projecting as well as the influences they are absorbing online.

7. Broadcasting videos – "Vlogging"

"Vlogging", or "video blogging", is an activity whereby "vloggers" like to make videos about interesting topics, their personal opinions or just recording their daily life. Vlogging is similar in many ways to reality TV and those who choose to share details of their personal life run the risk of exposing themselves to bullying, burglary and other forms of unwanted attention.

8. Privacy

Cases of compromised personal data and privacy in general are fast becoming an ever-present headline, with even some large corporations falling victim to "hacks". Understanding that there are people out there whose sole mission is to obtain personal data from unsuspecting, ordinary people without their consent and for criminal purposes, should make parents stand to attention. Upgrading your child's privacy settings on their social media accounts is a simple and quick way to protect you from becoming an easy target to such crimes.

The GRA's own Information Rights Division has published some very useful information regarding this topic. You can access this information via the following links:

http://www.gra.gi/data-protection/global-sweep-of-websites-and-mobile-apps-raises-concerns-about-children-s-privacy

http://www.gra.gi/data-protection/press-releases/data-protection-survey-shows-that-virtually-all-local-students-use-social-networking-sites-and-40-do-not-use-privacy-controls

Most internet users will likely experience abuse online in one form or another, either by association to a group or as an individual. Being prepared for these dangers, is key in determining how the affected party acts after falling victim to online abuse.

Our intention is NOT to deter parents from allowing their children to use smart devices, but instead to make them aware that risks do exist and that parents should therefore be mindful of their child's activities online. Education is key and awareness of the dangers is crucial if parents wish to prepare their children if or when they encounter abuse online, ultimately reducing the negative impact of these new age online crimes.

Who We Are

The GRA, which was established under the Gibraltar Regulatory Authority Act in October 2000, is the statutory body responsible for regulating the electronic communications sector in Gibraltar. This includes telecommunications, radio communications and broadcasting transmission. We are the national supervisory and regulatory authority for telecommunications in accordance with EU law which has been transposed into national law.