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Lincolnshire COUNTY COUNCIL Working for a better future

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

MALICIOUS COMMUNICATION

Over the last few years, we have seen a rise in children across Lincolnshire receiving criminal records for offences covered by the Malicious Communications Act. The act has existed since 1988, so what exactly is it, and how can we, as parents, protect our children?



What is it?

Malicious communication is sending messages, pictures, and videos **intended to cause distress or anxiety** to another person. It can happen through various ways, online and offline, and can be categorised into a few types:

- **Threats:** This includes verbal or written threats of violence or harm to someone or their property.
- **Harassment:** Repeatedly sending messages that are insulting, offensive, or upsetting also known as spamming someone.
- **Offensive Messages:** This includes sending messages that are sexually suggestive, extremely rude, or discriminatory.
- **Inappropriate Images:** Sharing embarrassing photos or videos without someone's permission.
- **False Information:** Knowingly spreading false information about someone with the intent to cause them harm. Pretending to be someone else to trick someone.

The key point is that the sender's intention is to cause distress or anxiety. A single message might not be considered malicious communication, but a repeated pattern of messages intended to bully or frighten someone would be.

Impact on Children

Malicious communication can have a serious impact on children's emotional well-being. It can make them feel scared, anxious, and depressed. In severe cases, it can even lead to self-harm or suicide.

On the other hand, if your child is found guilty of malicious communication, they could be excluded from school and face criminal charges.

What can I do to protect my child from malicious communication?

There are a few things parents can do to help protect their children from malicious communication:

- **Don't Respond. Report the user. Block or Mute.** It can be tricky but it is important children try not to engage with hurtful messages as this can often make things worse. Use the report features available on the apps and then block that person from contacting you. If there is a risk they may create a new account to contact you on, use the mute feature to stop getting notifications from them.
- **Communication is key.** Taking an interest in our children's online lives, asking them who they are chatting to, what games they are playing etc will make them more confident to talk to you when things go wrong. Although it can be tempting to take the device away when things go wrong, as a method of protection, this has been shown to put a barrier up and stop children telling adults about concerns. Instead work together to deal with the issue. Report together, Block together and praise them for talking to you.
- **Teach them online safety practices.** This includes things like not sharing personal information online, being careful about who they befriend, and being selective about what they post.
- **Know your reporting options.** Most social media platforms and websites
- have ways to report malicious communication. Take screenshots as a way of collecting evidence, as you may want to consider reporting it to the police. Click here or visit https://reportharmfulcontent.com for more guidance and support on reporting harm.

How do I teach my child to be a good digital citizen?

Teaching your child to be a good digital citizen can feel overwhelming but remember it just requires the same key behaviours we already teach our children when navigating the real world. **Show respect** for others and their boundaries, be polite and speak with kindness. If you are feeling angry or overwhelmed **walk away** and take some time and space. **Don't respond** to unkind comments instead get help from a trusted adult. Remind them that their words online have **real-life consequences**. It is important to have regular conversations about what they are doing and who they are talking to. Discuss things that upset them online and how they can regulate themselves when emotions get too big. Children can often say or do things out of anger that they later regret, reinforce the need to **stop and think before reacting.** Work with them to establish **clear boundaries** for how we speak to others and what is acceptable. If you feel you need more support, reach out to your child's school and check out the sites below.

CEOP education provide lots of helpful tips for parents including on how to set boundaries. https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/parents/

Help and Advice

internet matters.org

Internetmatters is your one stop shop for guides on how to set up parental controls on devices and on your internet. https://www.internetmatters.org

Check out our video about Malicious Communication on YouTube by clicking here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Akl9CgpP9t8

