Virtual Lives ▪ A Guide for Parents and Practitioners

This booklet contributes to an ongoing body of work by the Health Improvement Department of the Western Health and Social Care Trust on how new technology impacts on the emotional health and wellbeing of young people. New technology includes the use of mobile phones and other devices that can connect to the internet. It allows us to carry out a range of activities from using search engines (for example, Google) to using social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

The booklet will support and enhance the CEOP (Child Exploitation & Online Protection) ThinkUKnow training that is currently available across Northern Ireland that is delivered to parents, carers, practitioners and others about internet safety.

Supporting information is included such as legislation around inappropriate internet and mobile phone use. Because of the wealth of information available, it is impossible to include everything in this booklet but contact details for where you can find other useful information can be found on the final page of this booklet.

This booklet is also available in an electronic format with hyperlinks to other useful websites highlighted throughout the resource.
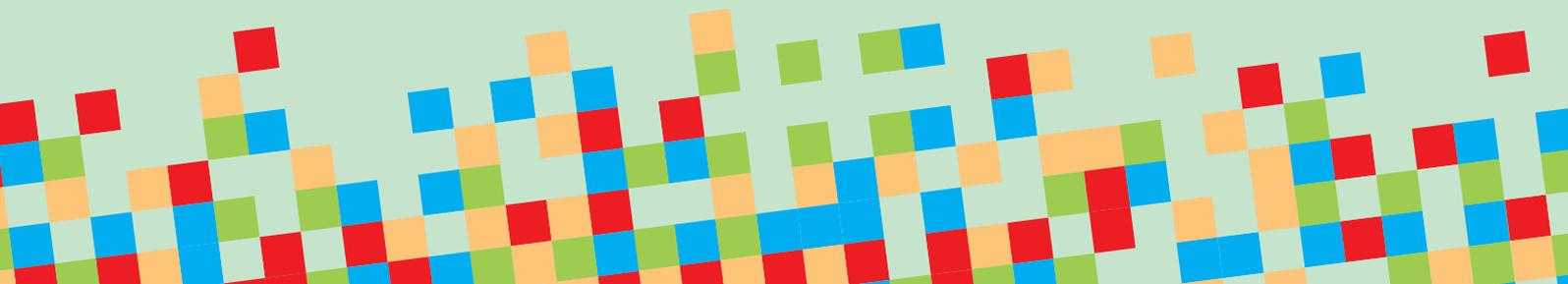
Virtual Lives ▪ So what's the problem with the internet?

Children and young people have access to the internet in many ways. For example on internet enabled devices such as smartphones, laptops, tablets, IPods, Ipads and even games consoles.

The internet presents a host of valuable information at our finger tips, allows us to connect with family and friends worldwide, allows us to share information and can give us a real sense of belonging.

However, because the internet is not regulated, it allows information to be uploaded that can be disturbing, controversial and sometimes confusing. It presents parents, carers and practitioners with challenges such as:

▪ Availability of inappropriate material, for example, pornography and explicit images and text.

▪ Potential contact from someone who may wish to bully or abuse children or vulnerable adults. This is known as cyberbullying, cyber stalking or online grooming.

▪ Children may be at risk because of their own and others behaviour e.g. sexting and disclosing personal information online.

▪ Young people can be unaware of the hidden financial costs and the influence of advertising online.

▪ Many adults are unfamiliar with such devices and children appear to know more than us about new technology.
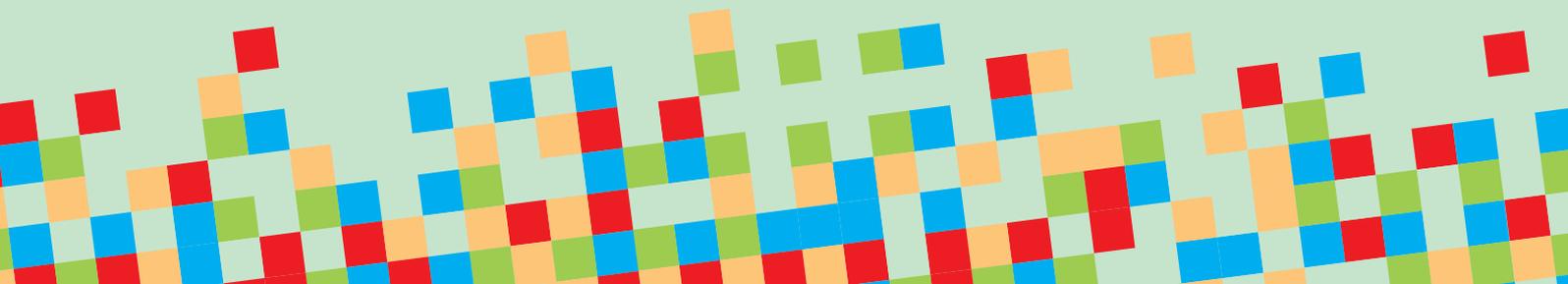
# Virtual Lives ▪ What is Social Media?

Social Media is a way to communicate with others online and to connect with others, for example sharing ideas, photos, videos, likes and dislikes and being part of a community. Social networking sites include Facebook, MySpace and Twitter.

Usually free to join and open to young people and adults (sites such as Facebook and Bebo have a minimum age limit of 13 for registered users; (MySpace's age restriction is 14), social networking sites allow registered members to set up personal profiles and then communicate with friends, and, if they choose, others (unknown to them personally) who share their personal interests. A user will have their own home page, which details their personal details (age, location, marital status, for example) alongside a picture and other details about themselves - the music they like, their favourite movie, the football team they support, etc. They can send messages to friends; download games and applications, share photos and music and chat.

Users can also join groups, publicise events and invite other users to attend, or start their own blogs. In the case of Facebook and Twitter, they can also provide frequent status updates, broadcasting to those in their networks what they're up to, how they're feeling or where they are.

▪ **Click here to read more about social media and your child**
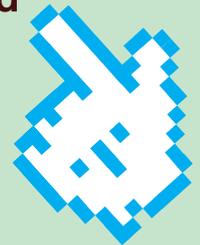
Virtual Lives ▪ Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent and happens when abuse or intimidation against a child under the age of 16, is carried out using the email, chat rooms, social media, instant messaging or texting.

▪ **Click here to read more about cyberbullying**
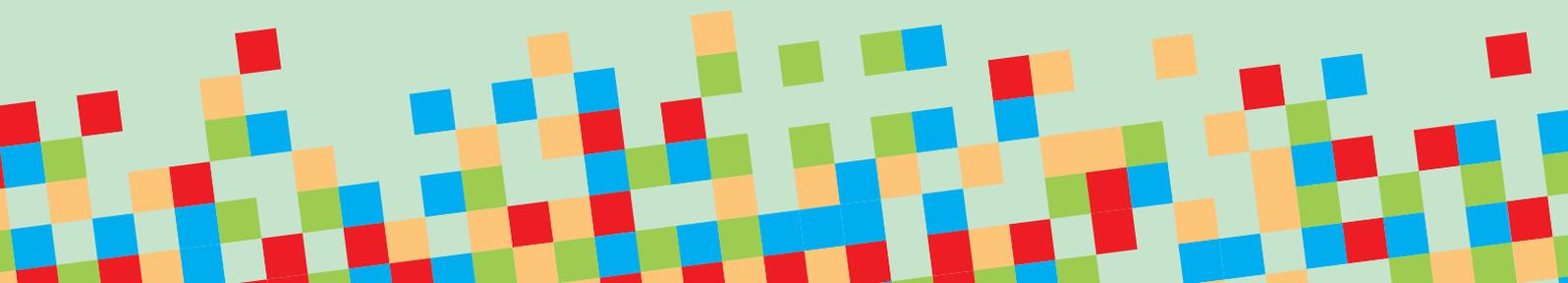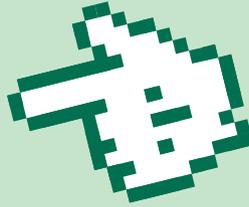
Virtual Lives ▪ Online Grooming

Online sexual predators use chat rooms, gaming sites and social networking sites to make contact with young people with the intention of persuading them into online or offline sexual activity. Children are increasingly being groomed over the internet and this is a criminal offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. With digital cameras, cameras phones and webcams becoming increasingly popular young people could be at more risk if they post provocative images online or share them via a mobile. The ThinkUKnow (ThinkUKnow) website run by CEOP (CEOP) provides excellent advice for young people/parents and teachers about this topic.

▪ **Click here to read more about online grooming**
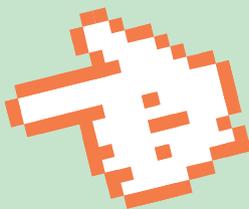
It's amazing, the number of parents I meet who would not think twice about talking to their kids about just about anything else that is risky - but have a blind spot about online. Children can be targeted from anywhere and offenders will cast their net widely to target large numbers of children.

Peter Davies, CEOP
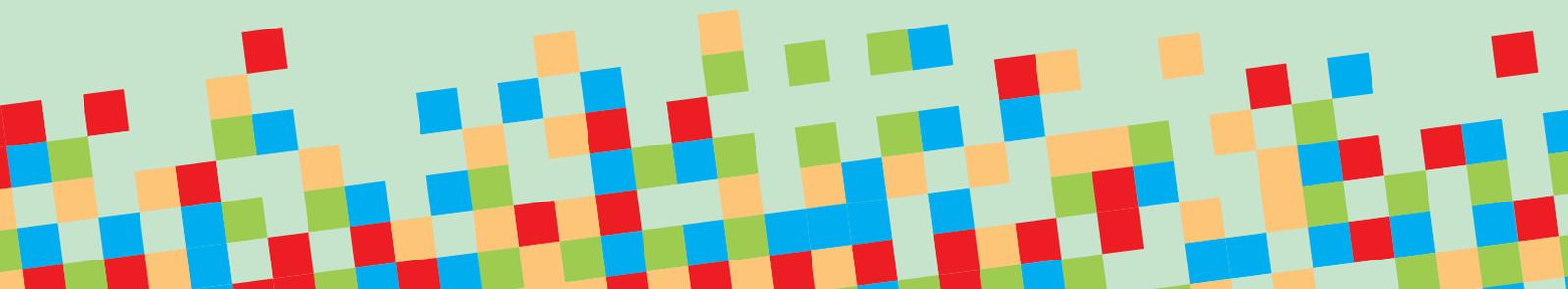
# Virtual Lives • Strike a pose, take a picture, regret it forever!

Sexting is when someone shares an inappropriate text or image with others. Unfortunately there is a growing trend in sexting and this is often due to young people taking risks and pushing social and sexual boundaries. With more access to Bluetooth enabled devices, mobile internet and mobile phones with cameras, images can easily be shared.

Once posted on the internet or shared with others, an image can be copied and posted on many different websites which can be accessed by predators. It is important that young people are aware that sharing indecent images can be a criminal offence and a prosecution often means that the offender is placed on the sex offenders register.

■ **Click here to read more about sexting**

It is a crime to take, make, permit to take, distribute, show, possess, possess with intent to distribute, or to advertise indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs of any person below the age of 18.

Sexual Offences Act, 2003
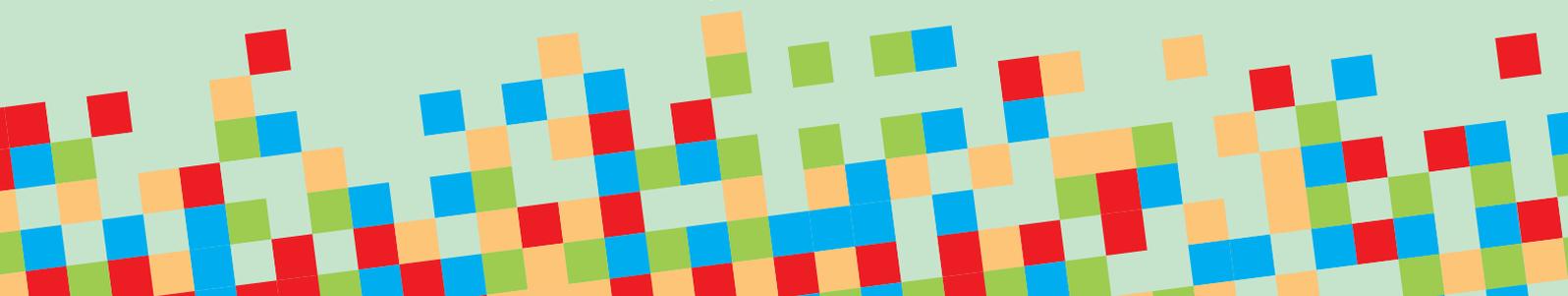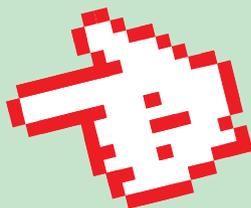
Virtual Lives ▪ What can I do?

Our kids may know more than us about the internet so we need to communicate with them! This allows us as adults to put things into context. If a child or young person comes across an inappropriate image, e.g. pornography it allows us an opportunity to explain to them that not all sexual relationships are like that in reality. If a young person's only frame of reference around sexual relationships is pornography it will give them a rather distorted view of what relationships and sexual relationships in particular entail.

Give kids this advice:

- Report apparent child abuse /suspicious activity immediately. Don't respond to messages or calls. Instead save them and report them to someone who is trusted, for example a parent or teacher. You can also contact CEOP for help and advice (see contact details).

- Children/young people should never go alone to meet an Internet "friend" in person. Never talk to people online who you don't know in real life.

- Block rude or abusive contacts – all social media sites allow users to block others and report inappropriate content. Some mobile phones will also allow users to block certain numbers or they can contact their mobile provider who may offer them a new number.

- Perpetrators of online abuse can be identified and prosecuted more easily if the young person takes a 'screenshot' of the abuse on their phone or internet enabled device (e.g. computer or tablet). This can then be used as evidence. Any abusive texts should also be saved and a note taken of the time and date.

- Set clear rules with your child for Internet use and talk to them about what they do online. Encourage your child to tell you if they feel threatened or scared online.

- Explain to your children about the importance of keeping personal information private, for example details of their school, home address etc.

- Use family safety software (e.g. Window Live Family safety or Google Family Safety Centre) so that inappropriate material is filtered. Make sure that you have up to date anti-virus and anti-spyware programmes installed on your home computer.

- Monitor all online activities by ensuring you know how to access the computer's history.

- Tell your child to choose appropriate screen names and e-mail addresses - something that will protect their identity.
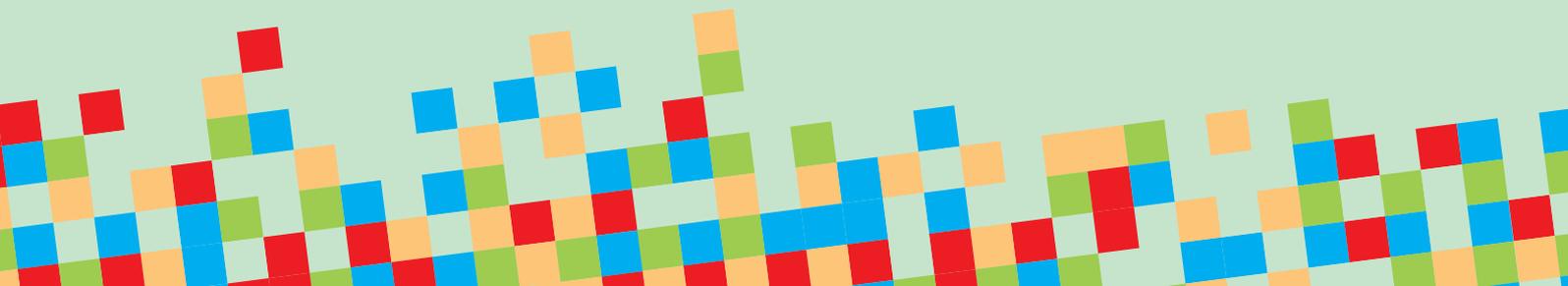
Virtual Lives ▪ Remember!

As a parent or in a parenting role, **YOU** have the opportunity to be the most significant and important influence on your child, and their decisions they make. Here are some tips for strengthening your relationship with your child:

- Build bonds and connections with your children. Do things together. Get to know your child so that if something is bothering them you can pick up on it.

- Use learning moments. These are opportunities for you to communicate positive messages to children. They may come from a question that children ask from a news item or a TV programme or something they have seen online.

- Know where your children are, who they are spending time with and what they are doing.

- Have clear rules in your home in relation to a range of issues and ensure your child knows the consequences of breaking family rules. It is important to be consistent.
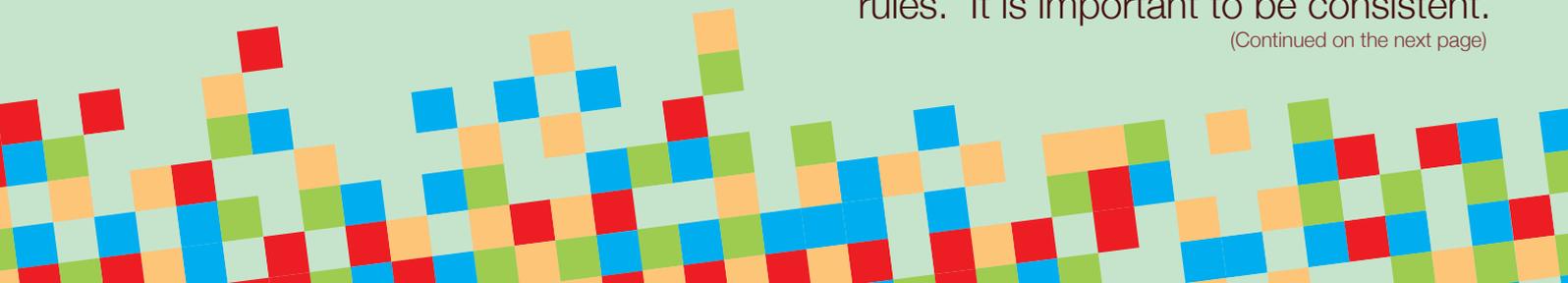
■ Encourage your children to feel positive about themselves and as well as celebrating their successes acknowledge and appreciate their efforts.

■ Encourage children to learn from their mistakes.

■ Help children develop skills around being able to cope, being assertive, being able to say 'no' and **being able to ask for help**.

■ Increase your knowledge! **ThinkUKnow** is free, half day training course which gives an introduction to the work of CEOP, demonstrates how young people are using technology, outlines some of the associated risks, and preventative measures that can be undertaken.
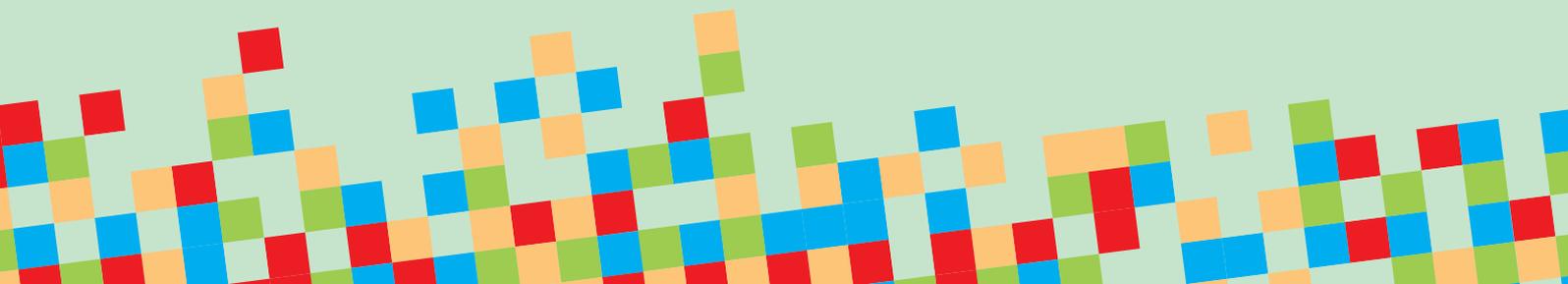
If you need immediate help or there is an emergency situation, you should always call **999** or contact local police in your area in the first instance.

Otherwise you can report any concerns (eg bullying or abuse) via the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre website at **www.ceop.police.uk**

Alternatively you can talk to Childline by phoning **0800 1111** or visit the website at **www.childline.org.uk**

Children and young people can talk to other young people about concerns by visiting Cybermentors on **www.cybermentors.org.uk**

A full list of organisations that can provide help and information is listed on the following pages of this resource.
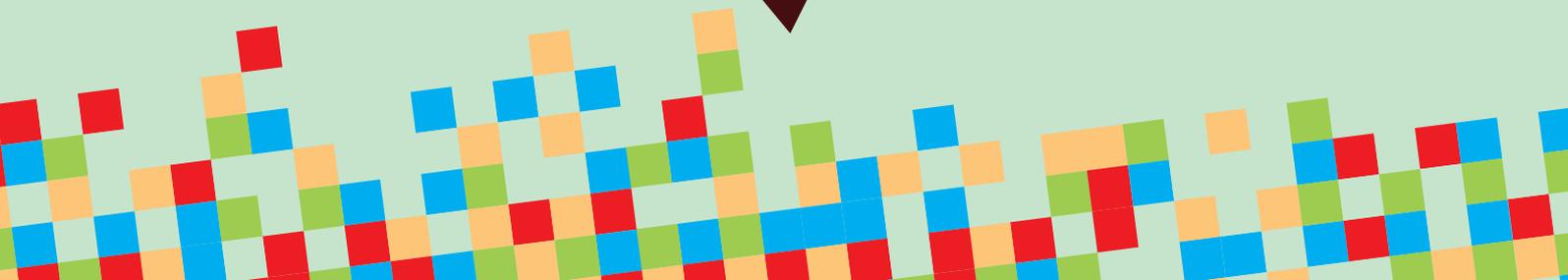
Virtual Lives ■ Useful Contact Details

www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents

www.chatdanger.com

www.kidsmart-org.uk

www.there4me.com

www.childnet.com
(for reporting online abuse)

www.ceop.gov.uk

www.iwf.org.uk

www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com

Childline 24 hr helpline: **0800 1111**

www.childline.org.uk

www.nspcc.org.uk
NSPCC Child Protection helpline:
080 8800 5000

PSNI: **0845 600 8000**

Health Improvement Department
028 7186 5127

Nexus N.I. – support for sexual abuse /
sexual violence
Enniskillen: **028 6632 0046**
Derry/Londonderry: **028 7126 0566**

Lifeline – support for those in
distress/despair around a range of
issues including; depression, anxiety,
trauma, suicide, self-harm and abuse.
link to UK safer internet safety.

**www.lifelinehelpline.info
0808 808 8000**