SPOTLIGHT ON SAFEGUARDING

WORKING TOGETHER TO KEEP OUR YOUNG PEOPLE SAFE

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- What are VPNs?

Helping children navigate grief with understanding and care

As children grow, their understanding of life and of loss deepens. The death of someone close, whether a family member, friend, teacher or someone in the public eye, can have a significant impact.

Grief during adolescence is complex. While older children may seem more independent or emotionally mature, they still need consistent care, guidance and opportunities to process what they're feeling.

Understanding grief in adolescents

Teenagers, and those nearing their teens, are at a unique stage of development; forming their identity, seeking independence and navigating big emotions. When they experience loss, their grief may be shaped by:

- a growing understanding of death's finality
- big, sometimes overwhelming, emotions like guilt, anger, anxiety or numbness
- questions about meaning, fairness and faith
- concern about the impact on friends and family
- reluctance to share feelings for fear of upsetting others or appearing 'weak'.

Some young people may seem to shut down, while others become more reactive. Both are natural responses. Grief is not linear - your child's emotions may come and go in waves.

When to seek additional support

While grief is a normal response to loss, sometimes teenagers need extra help. You might consider talking to your GP if your child:

- talks about self-harm, hopelessness or not wanting to be here
- struggles with daily functioning for more than a few weeks
- becomes highly withdrawn, aggressive or anxious
- is using risky behaviours to cope (e.g. substance use, skipping school).

Here are some trusted organisations that offer specialist support for bereaved children and families:

Winston's Wish – www.winstonswish.org

Child Bereavement UK – www.childbereavementuk.org

Cruse Bereavement Support – www.cruse.org.uk

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HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT YOUR CHILD

THIS ISN'T ABOUT BLAMING OR BANNING DEVICES; IT'S ABOUT GUIDING YOUR CHILD TOWARD HEALTHY, INFORMED USE OF TECHNOLOGY.

Talk regularly

Keep an open, non-judgmental conversation going. Ask:
"Have you heard of VPNs? Do you know what they do?"
"What do your friends use to get around blocks online?"

Check their device together

Review apps installed on your child's device. Look out for:

- VPN apps (like ProtonVPN, TurboVPN, Betternet, Psiphon)
- apps that don't match their usual interests.

Establish healthy boundaries

Set or review your family's digital expectations:

- when and where devices can be used
- what happens if they want to explore new technology (e.g. they come to you first).

Use parental controls

Check your home broadband settings - some allow you to block VPN use or notify you if one is installed.
Tools like Google Family Link or Apple Screen Time can also flag unusual activity.

Teach them why privacy and protection matter

Children benefit from respectful discussions about safety. Help them understand that VPNs:

- facilitate access to harmful content
- can expose their data to strangers
- make it harder for trusted adults to help if something goes wrong.

Helpful resources

- Internet Matters – VPNs and Online Safety

www.internetmatters.org

- Common Sense Media – Parent Guides to Apps and Tools

www.commonsensemedia.org

What is a VPN?

A VPN (Virtual Private Network) hides the user's online activity and location. It creates a private 'tunnel' between the device and the internet, making it much harder for anyone, including parents or schools, to see what websites are being visited.
Many adults use VPNs for privacy or to access overseas content. But when used by young people, VPNs are often used to bypass controls or filters; which can lead to unsafe or inappropriate online experiences.

Why children might use VPNs

Children may use VPNs to:

- get around parental controls or school filters
- access restricted apps or websites
- avoid being monitored on shared devices
- download or stream age-restricted content
- appear as though they're in another country.

This can expose them to inappropriate content, online predators, cyberbullying and privacy risks - often without parents and carers even knowing what's happening.

How children access VPNs

It's easier than many parents and carers realise. VPN apps are often:

- **freely available in app stores** (Apple App Store or Google Play)
- **promoted on YouTube, TikTok or Reddit** by influencers or peers
- **disguised with harmless-looking names** or icons (e.g. weather apps or game boosters)
- **shared among friends at school** who have used them to get around blocks.

Some are advertised as 'free internet', 'unblocker', or 'private browser' - which can sound appealing and even harmless to young users.

Let's work together

If you're concerned or unsure whether your child is using a VPN, please don't hesitate to reach out to us. We're here to help keep your child safe - not only in school, but in their digital life too.
With your support and open communication, we can help young people make smart, responsible choices as they grow up in a connected world.