SPOTLIGHT ON SAFEGUARDING

WORKING TOGETHER TO KEEP OUR YOUNG PEOPLE SAFE

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Understanding 'Com Groups' – what parents should know

Recently, alarming reports have emerged about dangerous online networks sometimes called 'com groups' or 'com networks.' These are loosely organised online communities, often on social media, messaging apps or gaming platforms, where cybercriminals and abusers target children and teenagers.

While each group can be different, many share disturbing and coercive behaviour, encouraging or demanding self-harm, blackmail (including via intimate or personal data) and normalising violence, abuse or even suicidal behaviour. Some groups reportedly use intimidation, threats or manipulation to control vulnerable youngsters. These groups are not hidden on the fringes - they can exist on platforms used daily, such as Roblox, Telegram, Discord and others. This means any child could be at risk, which makes awareness and vigilance essential.

Why some children become targets

According to experts on self-harm and online harm:

- young people coping with emotional distress - such as anxiety, low self-esteem, isolation, bullying or mental health struggles may be more vulnerable.
- some may be seeking connection or acceptance; abusers exploit this, offering reassurance or belonging in return for compliance or secrecy.
- perpetrators often use coercion or blackmail, luring children into trust or secrecy, then manipulating them into harmful acts or threatening to expose sensitive information.

Signs that a child might be involved

- **Unexplained mood changes:** sudden depression, irritability, anxiety or withdrawal from family and friends.
- **Physical signs of self-harm:** unexplained cuts, bruises, burns or other marks; covering up arms or legs even when it's warm; reluctance to join in activities like swimming or wearing certain clothes.
- **Behavioural or digital-use changes:** secretive online activity, reluctance to share who they're talking to or spend a lot of time online; avoiding questions about friends or online contacts; seeming nervous or guilty when messaging or on their phone.
- **Signs of distress or shame after online use:** references to 'group challenges' or 'private communities' they feel they can't talk about.

These online networks can sound frightening, but knowledge, awareness and open communication create a powerful first line of defence. By staying connected with your child, being alert for warning signs and building trust and support, you can help protect them from harm.

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Teaching young people about consent

Consent is often talked about only in the context of sexual relationships, but for teenagers, the concept is much bigger and far more everyday. At its core, consent is about respect, boundaries, communication and personal autonomy. Helping young people understand consent holistically gives them the tools to build healthy friendships, avoid peer pressure and navigate online and offline relationships with confidence.

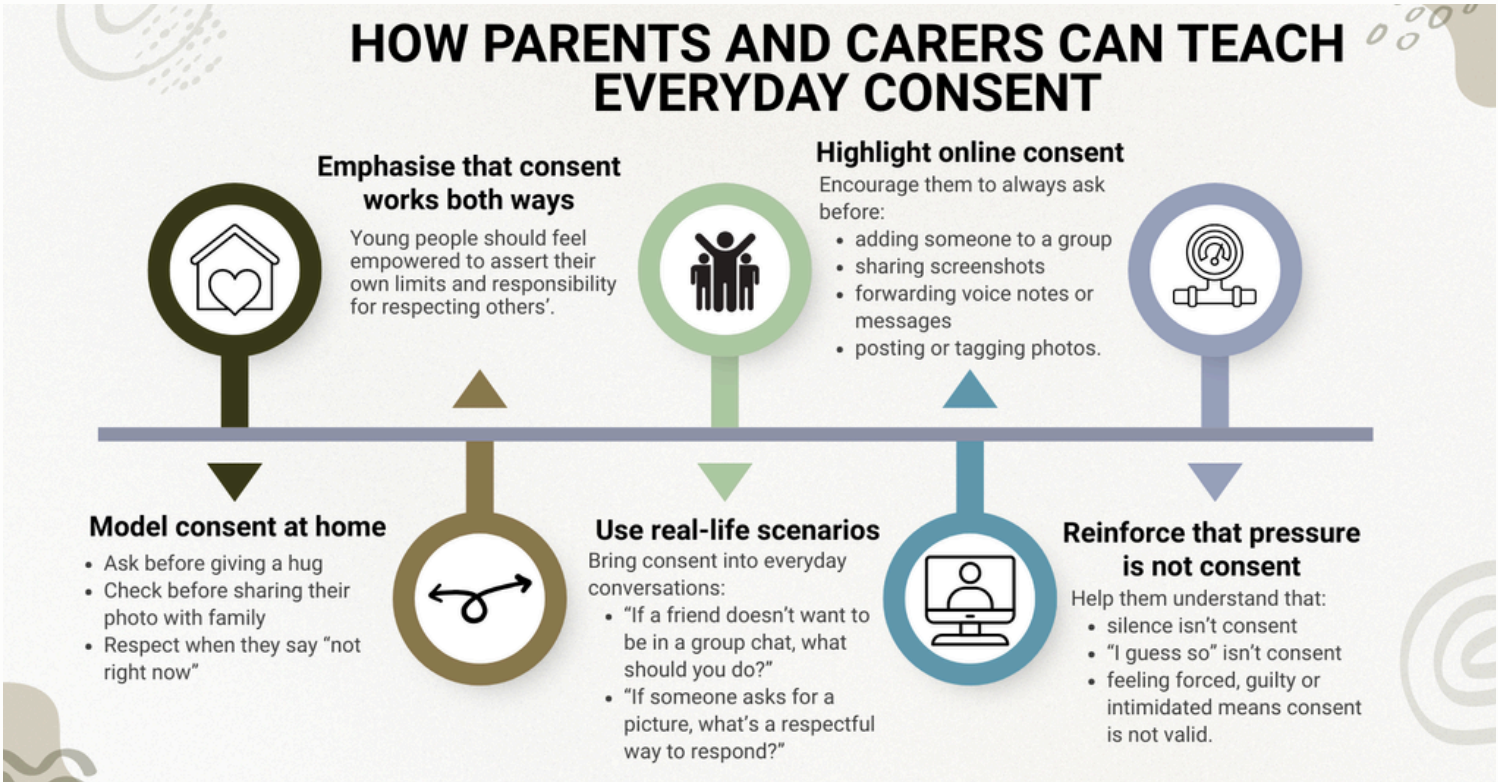
What consent really means

Consent is an agreement - freely given, informed and reversible - between people. It applies in many situations young people face daily:

- borrowing someone's belongings
- sharing photos or personal information
- hugging or physical affection
- joining group chats
- making plans that involve others
- even teasing, joking or play-fighting,

When young people understand that consent isn't a one-time conversation but a continual practice, they learn to respect their own boundaries and those of others.

Why young people need this skill

As young people grow more independent, their social world expands - both online and offline. They encounter situations where peer pressure, miscommunication or digital behaviour can challenge boundaries. Teaching consent early helps them to:

- feel confident saying no without guilt
- understand that they can change their mind at any time
- recognise when someone else is uncomfortable
- build friendships based on respect, not pressure
- navigate online sharing safely and thoughtfully.