

The impact of the online world on the mental health of care-experienced children transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, a podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering and kinship care. We ask children, social care professionals, and experts by experience to join us to share with us and you, our listeners, their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Hello I'm here with Doctor Vicky Walker. Do you want to introduce yourself? Vicky? I'm Jane. Thank you. It's lovely to be here. I'm a consultant paediatrician. I'm based up in the Nottinghamshire area and I'm also a designated Doctor. The children in care. Jane and I have been doing some work together with CoramBAAF as a project, looking at how we support.

Our foster carers and social workers and children and young people with their online life, and this is one of those resources. Thanks, Vicky. That's really good and I'm adoption consultant at CoramBAAF. And as you say, we've started doing these modules. I think we've called them and trying to collate. Resources into separate modules. Today we're gonna talk about mental health, but I think we've already. Started I'm picking a little bit just prior to recording how difficult it is to separate out mental health and online resources, but we'll have a go. I think what we've also decided that this is really hard, it's a really difficult area, everything is interlinked.

Yeah, everything we see and do can have an impact on our mental health and physical harm and physical health and all sorts of this. Things and day-to-day minute to minute can have different impacts, but Jane, you had said some really interesting things about why children in care might find it even more difficult.

Yes, because we know that as you always like to say, Vicky, if they're more vulnerable in life, they're more vulnerable online. And we know that children who are either already in care or living away from their families, maybe in a kinship arrangement. Oh. Or adopted already have factors that come along with them that make them predisposed to vulnerability in these scenarios, so they may have been exposed as children to inappropriate materials, so they're desensitised to online images. They're. They have issues of self worth sometimes and are trying to validate themselves online and trying to search for their own identity. We, as all young people when they get to that those teenage years, who am I? Where do I fit in? How does the world around me work? Our big issues for them? But if you're in care or living away from your parents, or you're adopted, then then you have an additional layer of. Of vulnerability that makes you predisposed to taking more risks because you don't trust adults anyway, so why do you trust them to guide you through the online stuff? Because they've already let you down. Me. Actually, plus the fact you might be looking to find family members, we know that a huge proportion of children who have a contact or staying in touch arrangement stay in touch or

make contact or initiate a relationship with members of their family over and above. What their plan is supposed to be, so there's all those additional factors for young people in care.

I think so. I think any child or young person can find sort of social media and how to navigate that world. Really difficult and yeah, and we can always say it's not. It's not the IT that's bad. You know there's people who put on content that is bad or people's behaviour is bad online and there are lots of reasons why that might happen as well and particularly. Give you 2 examples around the ideas around this idea of persuasive design. When we see autoplay, so the one thing follows the next follows. The next follows the next really short snippets of things that could impact on concentration. And when we see the algorithms coming in in the.

Yeah.

And so that you search for one thing and you can get that sort of downward spiral. Well, we know that.

Yes.

It's not. It's not the technology, it's people's behaviour online that causes problems and causes difficulties and we know that it causes difficulties for different age groups. Because when we look at things like autoplay very short 3 minutes, the next one just comes up and comes up. We know that's had an impact on concentration and development and adolescent brain development and that can lead you into struggles with emotional dysregulation, which we then know has an impact on mental health and resilience and anxiety. Management. And then if you're thinking about the persuasive design and the algorithms that gets you directly into this downward spiral of information about self harm and suicide, and you are overwhelmed.

Face. Yeah, so it feeds you back. What? What? You're not asking for, but what you're accessing. Yeah.

Overwhelmed by it? Yeah.

Yes.

And I think we've said as well that it can be harder to interpret the communication online. It's a very sort of flat screen of language and words and depending on how we're feeling and what we're doing and what time of day it is and whether we've had lunch, you can interpret any of that slightly differently.

Yeah. And we were talking about how those sites for an individual can be both harmful and protective in the same individual at the same time. But it's actually the contextual variables for that person on that one day as to where that determine which way that goes at anyone point in time. So things like responses and comments in the chat, or whether they've actually come

across it accidentally, or whether they've searched for it. Or whether it's been fed to them through the algorithm as you were just talking about their individual mood and circumstances. And also their other support networks around them and whether they're accessing that information alone or as part of another group. And there's other things that have happened to them that day. You know it's exam time, it's stress time, it's schools, it's families, it's all the all the normal things of everyday life. Around them, plus the additional things that looked to children have. So you know the starting point for all this is the NSPCC data. So we know that and this was 2021. So it's probably even more now you know that 70% of 12 to 15 year olds have at least one social media account 37%. So it's probably 45%. 8 to 11 year olds have a smartphone and 49% of them, so that's half of 8 to 11 year olds have their own tablet, so that's where we're working from. And then you know as soon as you get to 12 to 15 year old. 83% of them have their own smartphone, so actually the 15% that don't have their smart a smartphone are quite isolated and in it we could do a whole podcast about them as well and. And did you thought I could get it?

Well, it is that. Poverty, fitting in. Maintaining relationships, yeah.

But I think that you know that little video that you have and I don't know whether that's probably going to be uploaded onto our website at some point, the one about the little girl riding the bike and she, she says, you know, when I was little and I started riding my bike, I kept falling off and making mistakes. But my dad never took my bike off me.

Yes, yes, yes. The list in the breakfast table.

They told me to just get back on and carry on riding and try again.

This is how you do it safely. This is how you JK or even like learning to drive you know.

Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. So you have somebody alongside you watching how you're doing it. Anticipating what you're gonna do wrong, giving you guidance, telling you what to look out for. Watching for hazards. But we don't do that with smartphones and social media, do we? We go ohh, that's terrible stuff. Turn it off. Take it away. You shouldn't be doing that. Don't do that. It's all negative. Negative. Make negative. And maybe that's. Our. Issues as older people because we don't understand or maybe right. We know more.

And I do think different professionals are at different places with this. Yes, school have heard government guidance, all sorts of different things. You know, we've got the online safety bill coming in. There is a role for. Yeah. There is a role for government oversight, education, police, social care, 3rd sector. We all have a role in what? We ought to be. And the and again leading by example.

And I think what we are trying to do by producing these materials together is give the professionals that we work, work with some kind of alternative or just some prompts to make them think about ways of handling this.

Yeah, just to get people thinking about it and like anything some professionals will know loads about this and some.

So. Yeah.

Professionals won't feel confident about it at all.

No, but when? When it's up to them. So if you take a fostering supervising social worker, they're having to support foster carers to support young people in their care, or doctors who are trying to manage their child's behaviour. It's difficult because if you don't know it yourself. Then you can't support them to do it.

But the positive around that is that nobody's on their own in this there are just huge numbers of resources.

Yeah.

Out there now.

Yeah.

Huge numbers, you know of animations and things to read. Lots of really reputable sources as well, yeah.

And we're going to put links to those in our little modules on our online resources page. So it's about giving them the tools to start those conversations, isn't it? And it's about how, how do you start those those conversations because we know that I mean just just a little piece of work that I did looking at long term placement, bro. Down phones were and and game boys. Game machines consoles is the word were named in in over half of those breakdowns as a reason for breakdown. And we know that just taking their digital. Phone or smartphone or their access to online resources away removes absolutely everything else as well for them, so we're removing the. Their music, their source of comfort, their source of information, their homework, their learning, their banking, their games, their photos, their cameras, all their information, their notes, reminders, calendars, you know, yeah, all the.

They're photos, yeah.

Use their phone as a source of reminders their neurodivergent and have additional things on there. It it's a massive thing to be just taking away from them.

Yeah.

And yes, you're taking away all the positives and you might be taking away their counselling, their car map, their all sorts of things, their medication reminders, yeah.

Yeah.

So in terms of self harm, the majority of participants in these forums and who engage in these. Eight years are white females aged 14 to 22. Is that correct? Yes.

Yes, I haven't got a reference for it, but that feels right. It's definitely females more than males, yes. And it's definitely that young person age group.

And you know, we've talked a little bit about those contextual variables for this stuff, but also. Is it compounded by the lack of support in real life? I know I have my suspicions, but is it that the support is there, they just need to ask for it but they don't ask for it? Or is it that it's not there so people who engage in these behaviours are they? Unlikely to access support in real life, even if it was there.

So if you ask me in that way, I think the answer is going to be the same. It's multifactorial because for a young person seeking help. Help can change day by day what they may find acceptable, what they may find that they can do. We can't remove the fact that we have a lack of resources in certain areas, but also it becomes about who should be delivering that support because we can't expect the support to. All come from a hospital setting or from camps. Yeah, it's bringing in those ideas of anxiety and depression and that are normal emotions. So it goes back to what we're going to talk about, around resilience and crystal.

Yeah.

Thinking. So yes and no, and I am not aware if we've looked at what support you know, if you're not gonna ask for support, are you not gonna? Ask for support. In any medium, I'd say there is definitely a proportion of people and young people who are just not ready yet. We actually recommend online support for some people, yes, yeah. That works better because of the anonymity related.

Do it.

But this is where your algorithms might come into play as well, because if you start looking up self harm and suicide, you can get into the negative spiral of being directed into the inappropriate websites. And that's what a lot of the campaigning is about, yes.

Yeah, it's preventing those yeah. Sites, even existing. I mean, why does that stuff even exist?

You. Exactly. And that is what a lot of the campaigns around, because we still have to. But you know, yes, the behaviours are bad, but the algorithm is an algorithm and if it will, if it thinks you want to look for those words, it will just send you stuff that's got those words in it, because the

Internet is almost a flat resource, it doesn't work out the good or bad. The people have to work out the good or bad.

Hence wanting more regulation. Yeah. So just going back to what you were saying about anxiety and depression and those kind of emotions being part of everyday life, part of human beings, up to a point.

Yes, and they're almost precursors for self harming behaviour. Yeah. I mean, we think about self harm is normally linked to anxiety. So something builds up to such a level that by self harming you release the anxiety and how awful you feel about something so.

Yes.

It's not as simple as thinking about Christ for help. I think that's quite a sort of old fashioned term.

Yeah, yeah.

Young people need. Help and most of the idea around support and counselling is about replacing that self injury with something else that could reduce the anxiety distract you away from it.

OK. I mean.

Unless you know differently.

No, no, I'm, I'm, I'm. Prompting you to get your brain working, yes.

Well, well, also kind of in giving these questions to you, I guess I'm kind of acting a little bit like devil's advocate to get you to.

To that's what we need to do. These are the things that people are saying.

Yes, yes.

Isn't it? There is no support out there. Well, yeah, actually, I refute that. I think there is a lot of really, really good support. Might not be enough, might not be NHS, but there is support out there. But it's self harming. For self harming, but it's still about finding the right support for the right person at the right time.

The way there's somebody start if they because we all hear that the waiting list for cams is too.

And it.

Years. Yes. Where do we start? If we have a young person that we think is self harming, that is engaging in these websites that where we or we know is self harming. Where do we start to look for support?

I think probably places like Koran Bath which is gives you support to the adults to support the children. Yeah, NSPCC got some lovely resources.

Cost.

This the NHS websites got good resources. There are lots of online services so most CAMS team would accept. Yep. So for Internet ChildLine Bernardos there's a nice resource called Social Switch project.

Yes. Like UK paper Internet.

Ohh yeah, create your own feed. Be kind online with the social Switch project. Thinking about digital legacy, their ways of opening a conversation in a positive way. Yeah, all of them have got resources that support the adults to support as well as the young person, the chief online counselling and and some areas have got cams that will accept self referral phone calls. Some areas would offer a consultation with cams so you might not be getting day-to-day work or get.

Yeah.

Onto the self harm peer group, if that's what they. Need so the idea at the beginning is always assessing the level of risk because the children who are most at risk will be higher up a waiting list for a specific intervention that's needed at the higher level of risk when we're talking about day-to-day support. Comes appointment every week isn't going to help you day-to-day. No. So it's about empowering the carers and the social workers. And ironically enough, looking at what's available online, all the apps, so the.

Yeah. And empowering the young people themselves to actually look at the alternatives isn't.

It yes and self harm can still be a presentation of something else. If there are deeper mental health problems that need support and counselling, or we haven't removed the child from the situation that's causing them the problem. Was. Or we're dead. We're talking about trauma and aces. Those things aren't solved overnight, and they need a longer term input when the child feels able to do it just because we want them to be cured by the first comes. Outpatient appointment doesn't mean that's gonna happen. You know, there's been a little bit about the sort of.

Yes.

Medicalisation of distress. It's an interesting thing that's coming online, a very specific online thing. Lots of talk, you know, let the emotions out go online with very extreme emotions, extreme breakdowns, extreme.

OK.

Set tick tocks from a hospital bed. Those sorts of things just almost upping the game about what you need to do to to to gain the support or the attention or to feel better about yourself. So all quite legitimate stuff. I'm not blaming anybody who's doing that, but the idea of presenting yourself online. Is in itself creating a need to do something different and do something more so that sort of medicalizing extreme distress is a new thing really that's that's coming out over the last decade, probably and that.

Yeah.

Where the idea of resilience and emotional regulation comes in, cause absolutely encouraging to talk deal with problems finding solutions. But if you turn over that rock or open a can of worms or whatever you analogy you want to use the idea still then has to be to have some resolution and packing it all away. Again so that you could move on.

Yeah, yeah. And it and it's almost like that. They're going online to release that. But of course, going online to release that doesn't actually alleviate it in any way. No, because it's online. So it's not gonna resolve anything. So actually it might exacerbate it.

I don't. And it could get that little addictive idea or feeling valued by the number of likes that you get. So you bring in that whole concept of. I can make myself feel worthwhile depending on the number of people who lurk. The number of people who like the number of people who say please don't do something. You know you're bringing in a whole different arena of complete strangers who you're relying on.

Not actually even be real life people. They might be just clicks.

That's. Think, and they're certainly not people you know most of the time, all that you should necessarily care what they think. Well, exactly. You're allowing a complete stranger to offer you up some validation on the basis of and. And what if you don't get the same number of likes as you did on the last one? Do you have? To be a little more extreme.

Yeah.

So there's some real sort of strange into intricacies that come sort of from using online and videos and tik toks and things.

Yeah.

Yeah. Can I ask you about? I think we touched on it briefly earlier on about people being referred to online counsellors and having that kind of support bot or? Whatever you call them. And I I was reading something the other day, and apparently young people really quite like that because they can literally take their baggage and dump it there and leave it in the old days. Jane, you and I might have written a diary.

Down.

Yes, but this is true.

But but we this works in the sense of anything that helps somebody describe what they're feeling. To name an emotion, to name A cause, and then to try somehow to separate that from. Yourself for the situation, so this that is helpful. So that's where worry boxes come from. That's where writing it down. Yeah, that's where sort of, you know. Write a wish. Write a letter to Santa Claus. All of these things are about bringing things out of your head. It's almost like the idea of name it. And then you've acknowledged it. Then you can move forward because there are things that are in our heads that, you know, we haven't told anybody.

They're little worry dolls and all that stuff, yeah. Compartmentalise and.

Or we don't want to disclose and being able to write that down as the worst possible thing allows you in some ways to get rid of it. You've given it a name and giving something a name can take away its power sometimes, and just trying to work out what kind of emotion you're feeling is really important. It's important about resilience. As an adult, I struggle working out how I feel sometimes, and I said then while I'm angry, it's like. Am I angry? Am I irritated? Am I frustrated? Do I feel judged? Am I anxious about something? All of that sort of emotional recognition? Can come if you're in a safe space that isn't in front of somebody.

Yeah. And you're mature enough to work your way through those issues as well.

Yeah, and this is the idea of we've all got our baggage and and are we going to completely unpick it or do you know if you're doing fine, leave it. Walk around with it. Yeah, you know, but it's sort of we all have different ideas about sort of what therapy we want and met, what might help and what not help. But what we want to do is to not have any of our past. Or our races. This impact on our day-to-day life to stop us enjoying life, having happy relationships and moving on and doing things we enjoy. That's all we can ask. We're not asking for perfect.

No and and I think that that's where the online stuff comes into play because they're. Said that, that image of perfection and that idea of perfection that they have to or we have to, you know, I don't exclude myself from this, that we have to live up to whether you're. Yes. Or a a young mum, or whether you're somebody baking cakes or whether you're a young person starting out in, you know, fashion or makeup or or whatever. All of that is fed to us as perfection, isn't it?

And if you don't get the right number of likes. And you can't do it to that level. You're instantly set up to fail. So you're watching something that is instantly making you feel less important or less good, and it doesn't always work like that. There's a huge amount of creative stuff out there, which is fabulous. But things like. Yeah. Well, yeah, the old days. Facebook. Yeah. People put things on Facebook as if they are living their best lives and their holidays and their families. They don't put when they've just had an argument with their partner or the dishwasher is broken. So people are giving this idea of.

Right.

Of a false life and I think for children in care, that false sense of family, everybody else is better. Everybody else is doing well and then if they're looking at people that they know well, they're all right. And I'm not. And or they found somebody else or we're doing something different. You know, it's a really sort of unfair starting point, and this is where, as adults, we could struggle with that. How could we not have fear of missing out or identify that that's not real? Not everybody in Facebook is having a lovely time, you know, and it becomes really difficult, I think, and that. Anything like that, that if you're looking at it constantly?

Probably TikTok, it's TikTok now, Vicky.

It's not. She's. I don't think it's even that anymore. I'm sorry, but TikTok is definitely.

No, it's not, but it's not Facebook, is it? No, but it is definite.

The an abnormal perception there is a lot more. Yeah, wrong, inaccurate information on and you can as well just being online something we hadn't touched on was the idea of sort of doom scrolling with everything that's going on in the world today. If you keep getting.

Yeah.

Pop ups about things that you can't control. That's a really hard thing to sort of manage, yeah.

Yes. Thank you for that, Vicky. That's been a really interesting chat. I think acknowledging how difficult it is. Who actually separate out these issues from the myriad of other issues that are not only online, but in life that influence our mental health are gonna influence how we react to things online as well. So going forward, I think we're going to put some resources on our website. Mm-hmm. And some links for people. Is there anything you want to say in summing up?

So what will be on there around building resilience and how to work with children? All of those things, a lot of this is about our own Edu. I think my last my last meeting as well as just reminding everybody that uh, for young people, their online life is as real to them as their real

life. Just ask find a question. My question in the health setting is do you feel safe online? So just find a question, find a way.

Yeah.

Open the conversation, treat it as part of normal, and that will start the conversation.

Yeah.

And then there's lots of resources and lots of support to help moving forward from there.

Yeah, and people are not on their own in this all. We're all together in it because we all have to tackle it together. I.

Think absolutely and I've I've been so pleased with the amount of resources and work and different things that are out there now.

Yeah.

It's been a lovely conversation, Jane. Thank you so. Much as always.

Thank you. Lovely to see you.

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