How to protect your child from trolls

Image: Eirik Solheim

The world is full of weird and wonderful things, nice and nasty people. And the internet allows us to access all of it, including the good and, unfortunately, the bad.

Once your child is active on social media, there is a good chance that people will comment on things they post. Most of the time, these comments will be positive. Sometimes they can be mean, as people who don't agree with something they've said or done tell them so in an angry or less than diplomatic way.

Less common, but often more bewildering for a young person, is when someone goes out of their way to upset and unnerve them.

Trolling is one of the more negative behaviours that your child may encounter online, particularly, on social media where anonymity can offer the possibility of hurting or offending someone without consequence.

Trolling vs shaming

• The term troll was born from both the verb 'to troll', a method of fishing (trawling), and the well-known monster from folklore.[1]

• A troll can refer either to the person posting the comments or the comment itself.

• Trolls fish for conflict; their bait is an inflammatory or downright bizarre comment, expertly designed to irritate people. They want people to respond to their remarks and to involve them in an infuriating, and pointless, argument.

• The terms trolling and shaming can sometimes be confused, but there is a difference.

• Shaming is when a group of online, usually social media, users collectively attack a person or a company for their behaviour. The attacks are often insults, condemnations or threats to the victim of the attack. People can become quite self-righteous and put others down viciously.

• People who shame others online aren't necessarily trolls, who often argue a point they don't actually believe in just to wind someone up. 'Shamers' are often 'normal' people who hold very strong views on a subject and want to hurt people they disagree with or don't like.

• Public shaming online has grown with the popularity of social media platforms in the past few years. We'll be covering shaming more closely in the next few weeks.

Where do trolls lurk?

As trolls tend to want to remain anonymous, and keep their online and real personas separate, Twitter is their ideal playground – you can be anonymous and still access anyone whose Twitter account is public. But, you can come across them anywhere online.

The mysterious trolling culture

Trolls might say incredibly insulting things – they may even express sexist, racist or homophobic views that they don't believe, with the sole aim of winding people up.

A complex online culture has developed around trolling, where people actually aspire to be trolls. Their main aim seems to be to cause as much havoc as possible.

Inventive and varied methods of trolling **have been created (link is external)**, such as tactical (where the troll constructs a 'credible persona' and slowly reels in the 'trollee',) and strategic (wherein the troll forms a carefully thought out plan over a long period of time).

We found one website offering advice for aspiring trolls, including:

- 'Drag [your victim] off-topic - the further off-topic the better. Remember, you are trying to waste their time.'
- 'Remember… you are talking to an idiot. Treat them with the ill-respect they deserve.'
- 'A troll's basic mission in life is to mischievously manufacture inflammatory opinions in an attempt to stir up disharmony and discord.'

Trolling or abuse?

Trolls generally want attention or interaction, and do this by posting silly, insulting or off-topic comments. But they can also be much more sinister and move into the territory of harassment or stalking.

In the last few years, there has been a lot of media attention around prominent female figures on Twitter – comedians, MPs, businesswomen, TV presenters – who have been attacked online by trolls seemingly just for being female and in the public eye. Sometimes, the comments are not only deeply rude and insulting but also graphically violent threats to hurt them in some way. Some 'trolls' have been successfully **prosecuted** (link is external).

Sadly, misogyny on Twitter is shockingly common. A **report** (link is external)on the subject from the political think tank Demos showed that over 100,000 Tweets mentioned 'rape' between 26th December 2013 and 9th February 2014, and more than 1 in 10 appeared to be threatening in nature.

Campaigners have been fighting to raise awareness of the issue, which is a positive step forward.

Just empty threats?

It can be difficult to determine whether the troll is simply saying empty threats to upset others, or whether they are truly nasty people, who mean what they say and will attempt to carry out the threats they make. You

don't know who's behind the account – they could be a convicted criminal. If you or your child receives any malicious threats or abuse online, it's important to report it to the police.

Don't feed the trolls

So what can be done about preparing your child for the possibility of encountering a troll?

Common advice is to ignore and delete comments that are irrelevant, and if they're abusive or upsetting to also report the user (to the social media platform, to the police, or both).

Remind your child that these people are saying these things to deliberately annoy or upset them, and they're not worth their time.

Advise your child to tell you if they come across anyone like this online. You can then help them delete the comment, report and block the user. See how below.

The technical bit! Avoiding trolls on Twitter

Blocking and reporting on Twitter

From a tweet:

1. On the tweet click on the 3 dots icon
2. From here, you can choose to mute this user, block the user, or report the tweet.

From a profile:

1. Go to the profile page of the account you wish to block.
2. Click or tap the gear icon on their profile page.
3. Select Block from the menu.
4. Click Block to confirm.

A fairly recent functionality on Twitter is that you can now share lists of your blocked tweeters with friends, allowing groups to mass-block any particularly disruptive users: **https://blog.twitter.com/2015/sharing-block-lists-to-help-make-twitter-safer (link is external)**.

Other social media

For information on how to report and block comments or users on Facebook or YouTube, click on the links below:

YouTube: **https://www.youtube.com/reportabuse (link is external)**

Facebook: **https://www.facebook.com/help/263149623790594/** (link is external)

Footnote:

[1] http://www.netlingo.com/word/troll.php (link is external)

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