We just couldn't keep up with what the phone could do' - The trouble of keeping kids safe online

Mobile phones and teenagers’ internet habits have changed dramatically over the past decade.

FOR EVERY PARENT, the thought of a young teenager getting their first phone has to be a daunting prospect.

Mobile phones have changed dramatically over the past decade, going from devices used to send text messages and make calls to handheld computers with full access to the internet.

For Jenny\* – a south county Dublin mother with four children – when her eldest daughter got her first smartphone at the age of 12, it was a stressful time.

She said that she and her husband were completely unaware of what the phone could do.

“We just couldn’t keep up with what the phone could do, we were so naive at the time,” she told *TheJournal.ie*.

“We would have been very unaware of what could be done on the phone,” she said.

When her daughter first started to go online, her husband set up a Facebook page to monitor her activity. “At one point I think my eldest daughter would have had about 1,200 friends on Facebook,” she said.

You wouldn’t have a clue who they were speaking to.

She recalls her daughter being completely obsessed with going online. “I would turn off the wi-fi and bring the modem to bed with me at night.

But she would get up in the middle of the night, going downstairs and picking up the internet from the neighbour’s house.

**Safer internet Day**

Today marks Safer Internet Day, which aims to raise awareness around the importance of staying safe online.

According to CyberSafeIreland, the children’s internet safety charity, parents in Ireland are overwhelmed with efforts to keep their children safe while using the internet.

CyberSafeIreland’s advice to parents chimes in with what Jenny said around the difficulties of monitoring her teenagers’ online activity.

The charity has spoken to more than 4,000 children aged between 8 and 13 since it launched just over a year ago.

Its research found that over a quarter of children had been in contact with a stranger either occasionally or every day on social media, messaging or gaming platforms (5% of children on a daily basis).

The charity released an animated video (above) with guidelines for how parents could monitor their children and keep them safe on the internet. These include communication, knowing what apps and games your child is using and putting up appropriate boundaries.

**Advice**

Speaking at the launch of the Action Plan for Education 2017 yesterday, Taoiseach Enda Kenny also raised the issue of social media and children, telling the kids of Scoil Mhuire Óg in Dublin that “it’s not all about the ‘Likes’”.

Kenny explained that every person has different talents and told the young school children that sometimes social media tells young people they have to be the “thinnest”, the “coolest” or the “most popular”.

Don’t mind that… No one can be all of those things together.

**Educating yourself**

Jenny’s daughter is now 17. She has another daughter (14), and two young sons (seven and four).

As the years have gone on, access to the internet and the social media sites teenagers visit have changed. Jenny said that Facebook isn’t used as often as it was. She finds that apps like Snapchat and WhatsApp are the most popular now.

“We’ve learnt a lot more about it now for my 14-year-old daughter,” she said. “We’re stricter around who she contacts; tell her not to use her real name and make sure her privacy settings would be on.

It’s all about educating yourself and making them learn about the dangers and to be smart about it.

*\*Jenny did not want her last name used.*

**Read:**[**Three challenges of being an exceptionally gifted child – cyberbullying, underachieving and money**](http://www.thejournal.ie/gifted-children-in-ireland-3015626-Oct2016/)

**Read:**[**Over half of cyberbullying cases happen to Irish children on Facebook**](http://www.thejournal.ie/cyber-bullying-3-2906259-Aug2016/)