PENNSYLVANIA STATE POLICE
COMMUNITY AWARENESS BULLETIN
CAB 007-19 December 16, 2019

MOBILE APPS PARENTS SHOULD KNOW

The Pennsylvania State Police (PSP) reminds parents to be vigilant about the mobile apps their children use, especially messaging and social media apps. Parents should frequently check their children's devices for these apps and monitor the activity associated with them to ensure the apps are being used appropriately and their children are safe.

According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 95% of American teens have access to a smartphone and 87% say they use their phones to connect with other people. Many of the apps they use are popular and fun ways for families and friends to communicate with each other. These apps may offer encryption which makes communication private. Parents should remember the mere presence of most of these apps is not concerning. However, open and frank discussions with your children and teens will provide them with the guidance they need on responsible use of these platforms.

Cyberbullying and exploitation are significant concerns related to the online and mobile app activity of young people. There are several behavioral indicators of cyberbullying or exploitation. Cyberbulling.org provides information and resources for parents and teens to recognize the signs of cyberbullying and how to defend against it. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children developed a program called NetSmartz, which is available to teach children and teens to make safer choices and also offers a CyberTipline to report online exploitation.

Photo and video-sharing apps like ***Instagram***, ***Snapchat***, ***Tik Tok***, ***Live.me***, and ***YouNow*** allow users to share photos and videos, sometimes live. Snapchat photos, called "snaps" are viewable for a short period before becoming inaccessible, so teens may post questionable content, thinking it disappears forever. The PSP is aware of cases in which Snapchat was used to solicit and disseminate nude photos of children and teens. All of these apps encourage users to develop a fan base and use the number of likes and friends to gauge popularity. Consequently, teens may tie their self-worth to the size of their friends list and the number of likes their posts get, which can lead to depression.

Messaging apps like ***GroupMe***, ***Kik***, ***WhatsApp***, and ***Discord*** allow teens to keep in touch by sending text-style messages to individuals or to groups. Unlike dating apps, users only must be 13 years or older. They encrypt messages between senders, which makes it difficult for others to see what is being sent. This makes these apps ideal for sending offensive images and hate speech and soliciting nude photos.

Dating apps like ***Tinder***, ***Grindr***, and ***Bumble*** are intended for adults to find potential romantic partners. They are intended for users 18 years and older, but there does not appear to be any way to enforce age restrictions beyond the honor system. Predators may use these apps to target teens, and teens may use these sites to "catfish" unsuspecting users by setting up fraudulent profiles for any number of reasons. For example, five California teens used fake Tinder profiles to set up dates with unsuspecting men to rob them.

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Online communities such as ***Reddit and Twitter*** are social networking platforms that connect users with similar interests and provide them with a platform for microblogging. Reddit is a networking platform comprised of smaller communities called *subreddits,* which are based on people's interests. Subreddits exist for almost every topic ranging from careers, hobbies and interests to pictures and videos of cute animals. Parents should be aware however, Reddit posts and threads sometimes go viral, and there are subreddits parents may find objectionable or inappropriate for their children. Additionally, some subreddits appeal to people who have extreme political or social beliefs. Twitter is another platform used to interact with friends, celebrities, and others who are influential. These influencers can lead followers to other sites, such as ***Gab***, ***4chan***, ***8kun*** (formerly 8chan), and others that may radicalize young people and groom them to adopt extreme political, emotional, or religious behaviors and attitudes.

MICROBLOGGING

Microblogging is online social media content consisting of short frequent posts. It is designed for quick interactions in a variety of forms such as text, audio, video and images.

Vault apps such as ***Vault and KeepSafe Photo Vault*** are designed to keep photos, videos, and messages hidden. To access information stored in a vault app the user must input a password. Often vault apps are disguised as other types of apps such as a calculator, calendar or flashlight, which make them harder to detect. Vault apps are ideal places to hide things from parents such as nude photos or videos, forbidden contacts and other potentially inappropriate content.

The PSP recommends parents take the following steps to help their children stay safe and use mobile apps responsibly:

- Set expectations for appropriate social media use and screen time. Have regular check-ins to discuss the choices your child is making.
- Take inventory of the apps on your child's devices and know how they use them. This should be done regularly as apps are constantly changing and new ones are being released.
- If you find something objectionable, say so and tell them why.
- Establish clear consequences for negative behavior.
- Monitor your child's behavior for changes that may indicate problematic social media use.
- Educate yourself on apps. Your platform's app store can guide you by giving age limits and other information.
    - Common Sense Media is a nonprofit organization offering an app guide for parents to help inform them on appropriate apps and content for children from ages 2 -18.
- Utilize the app store on your child's phone to identify apps purchased to identify any hidden or vault apps.
- Use parental controls wherever possible. These will help you enforce limits you place on screen time and content.

If you believe your child or someone they know is being bullied or exploited online, contact local law enforcement. Alternatively, Safe2Say Something is a youth violence prevention program and reporting program run by the Pennsylvania Attorney General that provides a way to report threats to themselves or others anonymously. Always call 911 to report an emergency or crime in progress.