Perennial Issues?

Abstract A personal reflection contrasts different aspects of youth work, comparing those with a preventative/prohibitive approach (such as online safety) against more progressive harm reduction approaches (such as drugs and alcohol awareness). Conversations with young people highlight that listening and supporting are more effective messages than "don't do it", and argue that resilience narratives are being hijacked by preventative agendas that, while new in the online safety world, have been prevalent in youth work for far longer.

Keywords Online safety · Digital resilience · Harm reduction · Youth work

In this chapter, I will outline some of the issues that have appeared over the last ten years for professionals working in the sector concerning young people's online activities. While not an exhaustive list, these are reflective of the major concerns professionals and parents/carers have about young people's online lives and draw extensively from my work with young people. It shows that the issues they face, and those that the adults in their lives fear, are often quite distinct.

The issues I will be outlining are:

- Young people do not understand what resilience means.
- Professionals rely on a message of "just don't do it" due to a lack of capacity to explore issues in a more nuanced way.
- Professionals do not use harm reduction messages when it comes to online activities.
- Most adults believe playing violent video games leads to violent behaviour.
- Professionals and parents/carers fear that young people might access the "dark web" to buy drugs, when this is actually happening on social media.
- Adults do not know how to safeguard young people's rights when it comes to online activities.
- While young people may experience bullying online, they also find ways to access support and support one another online.

The chapter concludes with some reflections on how the need to develop support for professionals around these issues resulted in the research direction that resulted in the Online Resilience Tool.

YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT RESILIENCE MEANS

As a youth worker, I hear the word "resilience" everywhere. It is a concept that professionals working with young people are increasingly concerned about, and as a profession, we are constantly asking "How can we build resilience in young people?".

This question comes from a fundamentally good place, recognising that young people have to face challenges that didn't exist 10 years ago and that as professionals we don't necessarily have comparable personal experiences to draw on to support young people. As a result, schools, youth workers, social workers, police and parents/carers all talk to young people about resilience—we repeatedly tell them how important resilience is, but we never tell them specifically *what* it is.

In all the sessions I run with young people, I ask them what they understand by the word resilience. I've not had a correct definition to date. The suggested meanings are "you don't give up", "you keep going, no matter what", "you're brave" and, heartbreakingly, "you don't ask for help".

My definition is that resilience is the ability to bounce back when bad things happen, or.

as Masten puts it:

Resilience can be broadly defined as the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development. (Masten, 2014)

Definitions are really important when we think about how we talk to young people about Online Resilience. We should be taking great pains to ensure they understand what we mean when we talk about resilience. After all, we cannot completely insulate young people from bad things online. Nor should we be teaching them to just put up with bad things.

When these bad things are then reported to professionals, the ensuing panic surrounding the young person is likely to be something they dread, and may even be interpreted as a punishment.

I supported one young person who told me she had sent a nude to a boy in her year; he was then using this to blackmail and coerce her into sending more, under threat of revealing what she had done to her friends and family. When she told me, I explained that I had to tell someone in order to keep her safe. She begged me not to tell.

From her point of view, she was going to be in trouble for sending the photos. I explained the safeguarding process to her, following the rules I had learnt in training about not making promises that everything would be ok.

We were able to effectively safeguard the young person and prevent further exploitation from occurring on this occasion. However, the experience from her perspective was probably much what she predicted—her mum was angry at her for sending the picture in the first place and the police took her phone as part of their investigation.

Thinking of this example alone, we can see why young people would start to think that resilience means not telling people when things go wrong—keep your mouth shut and you'll be allowed the freedom to explore the online world, tell someone and you'll have your device and/or freedom to use that device, taken away, not to mention the negative/authoritative response from other adults. Again, general safeguarding training encourages professionals to consider their reaction when a young person discloses abuse, but parents/carers do not receive the same training, plus being highly emotionally invested in their child's

happiness, they are likely to have their own feelings about harm coming to their child. Most parents/carers I have discussed these issues with are able to see that it's better to know what's happening, and therefore, an explosive reaction is unlikely to foster a positive atmosphere in which a young person can share mistakes they've made. However, the ability to rationalise this is quite different to applying it in practice.

It is precisely the experience of making mistakes that helps young people build their resilience, particularly in the context of the online world. Therefore, a better definition of resilience is this one:

> Digital resilience is a dynamic personality asset that grows from digital acti-
> vation i.e. through engaging with appropriate opportunities and challenges
> online, rather than through avoidance and safety behaviours. (UK Council
> for Internet Safety, 2019)

We need to give young people the tools to safely explore the online world, prepare them for it and support them when things go wrong—much like we do with the offline world. We need to recognise that a young person making a mistake once does not mean they are incapable of recognising all other online risks. Equally, a young person who shows a great deal of resilient behaviours in some areas will have others where they may be more likely to take risks or become vulnerable to grooming or harassment. We need to remember that resilience isn't fixed for young people, their ability to deal with challenges will vary based on their previous experience, personality type and culture (Masten, 2014).

A big problem with the way professionals have approached the issue of resilience and safety in the online world is that it is seen as an optional extra—both something professionals can choose whether or not to address (PSHE Association, 2020a) and something young people can choose to put down and walk away from.

However, since the 2020 lockdown, when schools began teaching lessons online, and the government rushed to ensure all pupils had access to devices for this purpose (Department for Education, 2020, 2021), the online world has not been an optional extra for young people. It has become a mandatory part of their education. As a result of lockdown, it's unsurprising that much social interaction moved online. While we're still waiting to see how much of "normality" we'll be getting back to, the ability of young people to walk away from the digital world has dwindled.

Additionally, professionals can no longer opt out of discussing the online world with young people as it is included in the, now mandatory, PSHE curriculum (Department for Education, 2019).

We must discuss Online Resilience with young people, before we reach the point of needing to safeguard them. We should accept that they will make mistakes, and be able to support them effectively when they do. We need to ensure they understand what we mean by resilience, and we need to ensure that we are not using "resilience" as a fixed thing which will either put them at risk or protect them in all circumstances.

Professionals Relying on "Just don't Do It" Messages Due to Lack of Capacity

I started my career as a youth worker in 2008, just as government cuts from austerity were starting to be felt across services. I've seen increasingly tight funding squeezed and stretched. I've seen traditional youth work approaches abandoned and many youth workers become disillusioned with the increasing volumes of paperwork required to prove the worth of the work they do with smaller and smaller budgets.

I've also seen thresholds increase, from mental health to sexual violence services; the only way statutory services could manage caseloads was to only deal with the most complex cases (Law et al., 2015). This hasn't solved anything, as workers are more likely to struggle with their own wellbeing as they manage the most complex cases, which in turn may not have become so complex had help been offered sooner (Merriman, 2017).

In a reaction to this, various pots of funding have been made available for preventative care, increasing the focus on "social prescribing" which aims to offer community support to people suffering with loneliness, weight gain and low mood (to name just a few) to prevent a later need for medical intervention. This is not with the goal of improving health and wellbeing, but specifically to reduce demand on healthcare services (Polley et al., 2017). Sadly, in my experience, this preventative care is often swallowed up by those people who don't quite meet thresholds for other services.

In one of my roles, I supported young people who were displaying high-risk sexual behaviour. This project was described as "Early Intervention", but many of the young people referred into the service had already experienced sexual violence, either as victim or as perpetrator.

As they weren't at risk of causing or experiencing immediate harm, they were ineligible for support from sexual violence services—much to the anguish of the parents/carers, social workers and teachers attempting to support them.

In many cases, I was working with young people who were actively engaged in high-risk activities, and often, the young person had refused to make any changes.

One young woman I supported had been told by her parents, teachers and social workers that she had to stop drinking and using drugs, because using substances with her peers had repeatedly put her in situations where she was unable to avoid sexual advances from other young people. She didn't think of what she had experienced as rape or sexual assault, and if she thought anyone was to blame, it was herself.

She had been preached at for several years about the dangers of drugs, told that drugs would kill her. She had been told about the long-term harms of alcohol use, the damage it would do to her liver and heart. She had been told about sex and STIs, but no one had ever talked seriously to her about the meaning of consent, nor the role that substances can play in our ability to consent. No one had talked to her about her right to access contraception. No one had talked to her about how having sex with someone once doesn't mean you consent to future sexual activity with that person. No one had told her that wearing a short skirt didn't mean she was responsible for the behaviour of the men around her.

The panic surrounding this young person, from her parents, school and social worker, was extreme. She had been reluctant to work with me and had only agreed on the basis that it would get these other professionals off her back.

It became clear to me that she had been repeatedly told to stop doing what she was doing, which to her reinforced the idea that any sexual assault or rape was her own fault. She was "putting herself at risk".

In the work I did with her, we explored how she could continue to go out and party but reduce the harm she experienced from using substances. This included being more selective of the friends she used around, and ensuring these friends knew what was ok for her and what wasn't, so they could help look after her. I also supported her to access contraception and talked at length about sexual pleasure and how she could ask for it from her sexual partners.

This might all seem like common sense to read—of course we should take a *harm reduction* approach if a young person is refusing to stop

engaging in risky behaviour—but the interesting thing about this case is it wasn't one young woman. It was dozens of young women, all presenting in almost identical ways over several years.

These young women ranged in age from 14 to 17 and in many cases I had to break confidentiality to effectively safeguard these young women. Some of them needed specialist support from the young people's drug and alcohol service. Some needed mental health support. Some just needed a space to learn about sex without being told (explicitly or implicitly) not to do it.

It is certainly much more challenging to have a discussion about safer ways of using substances and how to seek sexual pleasure with a 14-year-old than a 17-year-old. However, we know that prohibitive messages are, at best, pointless and at worst can have effects opposite to their intention—we have seen it proven in studies into outcomes of the "just say no" approach to drugs (Werch & Owen, 2002). So why do we keep pedalling the prohibition message to young people?

Well, we've seen a massive increase in complexity and need which has to be managed with less money and less recognition (Law et al., 2015). As a practitioner in this profession, I've seen first-hand that the willingness to juggle this is motivated by a genuine desire to improve the welfare and future of young people.

Unfortunately, this means that young people who aren't actively engaged in risky or harmful behaviour are often left to their own devices (quite literally) save for a few blanket prohibitive messages. Despite all the evidence pointing to these messages being completely useless or counter-productive (Werch & Owen, 2002), I've seen them used all too often by over-stretched professionals as a quick and easy way to tick a box.

We're becoming stuck in a vicious circle of professionals with increasingly complex cases having less time to give to less complex young people. These young people therefore don't get appropriate and timely support, meaning they engage in more risky behaviours, leading them to become more complex if and when they eventually become eligible for support.

Another issue with prohibitive messages about online activities is that they can rarely be applied to the reality of using the internet. Take "don't give out your personal details on the internet". I was unsurprised that even the very youngest children we spoke to while conducting research in the Headstart Kernow project were able to parrot this message back to me. However, the frequent exceptions to this rule make it practically unhelpful as soon as young people have the freedom to use devices. I can't

remember the last time I downloaded an app that didn't ask me for some sort of personal information—whether it's fitness apps that want to know everything about your body, or social media that require an email address in order to sign up—we constantly and willingly give out our personal information online.

Clearly, there are security issues with this, but we should be wary of trying to hold young people to a higher standard than adults. If we download these apps and give out our email address, phone number, height, weight, BMI and top 5 favourite films without a second thought, we are modelling behaviour to young people that they are likely to follow.

Telling young people to act differently to the behaviours we model might encourage them to follow rules when they are very young, but as soon as they reach adolescence they are likely to believe these rules no longer apply—which can lead to an increase in risk-taking if they perceive such behaviours to embody more "adult" activities (Morrongiello et al., 2008).

Professionals Do not Use Harm Reduction Messages

As a youth worker I know how useful short, snappy phrases can be to get a point across. "Start Low, Go Slow" is one of my favourites as it can be applied to any substance and is easy to remember. Thinking about taking ecstasy? Start low, go slow. More likely to use cannabis? Start low, go slow. It's a simple, memorable harm reduction message that even the most conservative professionals can see the benefits of.

The "Just Say No" approach to drug education was adopted in the UK in the 1980s, accompanied in 1987 by the eponymous song by the Grange Hill cast following a storyline about a young heroin user. The phrase was equally catchy and memorable. But was far less useful—once a young person had decided to use drugs, there was no further information about how to stay safe. By the early 1990s, harm reduction-based drug education emerged as a response, with grassroots approaches to getting safety messages about drugs out into the spaces where people were using drugs (Crew Scotland, 2018).

Persuading professionals to leave behind the seductive security of "Just Say No" has been a long journey, and with PSHE finally becoming mandatory in 2020 (PSHE Association, 2020b) the adoption of harm

reduction techniques is finally becoming mainstream (PSHE Association, 2020a).

While this is great news, it has taken 40 years for sensible harm reduction information to be given to young people. Because drugs are illegal, it requires a body like the PSHE association to reassure professionals' reassurance that they won't fall foul of the law by talking to young people about how to take substances safely, as the end goal is to reduce harm from taking them. We also have to take sufficient time exploring the topic as a whole, discussing the nuances of the law and why we might tell young people about ways to reduce harm—this can't all be covered to the depth that young people deserve in one school assembly.

This same issue is currently being played out in another area of young people's online activity: that of sending nudes. As we have discussed in Chapter 2, the illegality of sending sexual messages is fairly well understood across all those working with young people, but the nuance of the law is not. Delivering training in Online Resilience to professionals, I've found a general lack of awareness that the law treats images and text differently, so if a 13-year-old sent a sexually explicit, text only message, they wouldn't be breaking the law. But if the message included a sexually explicit image, it would then be illegal.

In my experience, professionals have often expressed shock at this, which reveals a very simplistic understanding of how the digital world is used to express and explore sexuality and sexual behaviours.

Also, professionals tend to refer to this behaviour in young people as "sexting", which is unhelpful because it's not what young people call it. It's also unhelpful because the term is not commonly used to describe the same behaviour among adults. The problem with using the wrong word is that it draws a line between the lived experience of young people and the discussions we have in education settings to attempt to help them recognise risks and stay safe.

In my role working for a sex education charity, one of the most popular activities in sex education sessions was to get the young people to call out all the different names they knew for penis and vulva. This led to much hilarity as groups of young people would try to come up with the most obscure (and often obscene) names they could think of. But there was a serious side to this activity, and that was to ensure we were all talking about the same thing.

When we refer to "sexting" rather than to nudes, dick pics, tit pics, etc., we invent a behaviour which we, as adults, probably don't identify with

and which the young people are unlikely to identify with either. Sexting is tied up with the legality of sending sexual messages. It's not linked to the desire to share images that may excite or interest a potential sexual partner for mutual (or sometimes not mutual) sexual gratification. Young people aren't sending nudes because they don't understand the risks of doing so (and in the next chapter I'll explore what their understanding of those risks are); they're sending nudes because they want to get themselves, or someone else, off (Symons et al., 2018).

Then, there is the moral panic around "sexting". An NSPCC survey in 2016 showed that "7% of 11–16 year olds surveyed had shared a naked or semi naked image of themselves" (NSPCC, 2016). However, a YouGov survey from the same year found that 78% of parents were "either fairly or very concerned about sexting" (PSHE Association, 2016).

From this, we can see that there is a great deal of fear around the idea of sending nudes and yet our approaches to talking to young people about it focus on the idea that it's an abnormal behaviour and suggest young people will only do it when pressured into doing so. This is the message from the Childnet teaching resources (Childnet International, 2018) which are currently recommended by the PSHE Association (PSHE Association, 2019).

I'm not suggesting we shouldn't be teaching young people about the risks of sending these images, nor that we shouldn't be telling them that to do so is illegal. But a reliance on this message alone is likely to be as (un)successful as "Just Say No".

We need to tell young people about the risks of sending these messages in a context that will be meaningful to them. That does need to include teaching them about what might happen if those images are shared beyond the intended recipient—which should also include a discussion of how to get help if that happens—but our discussion must go beyond that.

Telling young people "if you send this message you'll lose control of it and it could be used to trick, humiliate or coerce you, plus you're breaking the law if you send it" is the same message as "if you take ecstasy you'll die in hospital, plus you're breaking the law by having it in the first place". Young people can plainly see that not everyone who takes ecstasy dies or gets arrested, and they can see just as clearly that not every nude gets publicly leaked, and not everyone who sends one gets arrested.

Not all young people will send nudes, but all young people need to understand that there are risks to doing so. We should be myth busting

how many young people actually do this, exploring how young people can manage these risks *if* they choose to send nudes and where they can get help if something goes wrong. We need the equivalent of a "Start Low, Go Slow" message for sending nudes.

It's also important to note that the consensual sharing of sexual images is not the same as young people being groomed or exploited online (Symons et al., 2018). It is extremely important that young people are taught to recognise when someone is pressuring them to send an image, but we cannot continue to lump the appalling exploitation of children in with their own, normal explorations of their sexuality. We need to stop teaching these two distinct experiences as one and the same thing, much as we would not teach how to negotiate sexual activity with a partner in the same breath as sexual abuse.

However, while young people can be criminalised for taking and sending sexually explicit images of themselves, it's going to be extremely difficult to effectively encourage them to get help. While Outcome 21 allows for "no formal criminal justice action to be taken", the incident is still recorded and therefore may show up on future DBS checks (Avon and Somerset Police, 2021). Until we can reassure victims that they will not be criminalised, we are going to struggle to effectively encourage young people to talk to us if they have had an image shared on without consent, or have been pressured or coerced into sending more images.

Not only does this situation look set to continue for the foreseeable future, but the same rules are starting to be applied across more situations; for example, hate speech on social media may be returned on a DBS check, even if it's recorded as a non-crime hate incident (Lyons, 2021).

Violent Video Games Lead to Violent Behaviour?

As we have illustrated at the commencement of this book, there is a strong, and unsubstantiated view among professionals working with young people that playing violent video games leads to violent behaviour. Instances of gunmen who attacked their school having played violent video games are used to illustrate this, and very little additional thought is put into it (strangely, eating crisps and pizza are never explored as common denominators in these cases, yet they must be as likely to yield positive results?). Longitudinal studies show no increase in violence linked to video game sales and increase in aggression is not apparent in the medium to long term (Cunningham et al., 2016).

Certainly, part of the problem is with the way professionals and parents/carers view the issue. If a child is playing a computer game and loses, or their internet connection drops out, or someone turns off their console, they're likely to have an aggressive response. This proves the belief that violent video games lead to violent behaviours. Obviously, it doesn't prove that, but those professionals and parents/carers are unlikely to consider the child's longer-term record which may show a lack of violent behaviours.

The Dark Web

In all my conversations with professionals about young people buying drugs online, the most common belief is that young people are using the dark web to do it. Perhaps this comes from a lack of understanding about what the dark web is. I don't think this is an adequate excuse. If a professional was supporting a young person who loved football, we would expect them to find out about football, at least enough to engage with the young person on the subject. However, commonly professionals and parents/carers will say "I don't know anything about computers/social media/technology" as though this exempts them from learning enough about it to discuss it with young people.

While there are inevitably some young people using the dark web to buy drugs, the majority of young people will have experienced a dealer trying to add them on social media. Speaking to a group of young people on the subject, one young woman explained that when it's coming up to a birthday or big event, dealers will send young people direct messages, knowing that they'll be looking to party. This is supported by the DM for Details report by Volteface, which explains that the sale of drugs on social media is not a simple re-creation of the offline drugs market, but an entirely new sales model (McCulloch & Furlong, 2019).

This disconnect between what professionals and parents/carers believe and what is actually happening again creates issues for having meaningful discussions with young people about the online risks they may be facing.

In the time that adults have been panicking about young people using the dark web, drug dealers have developed new approaches to selling on social media, including ways to get around the platform's filtering, for example by having a photograph of a page with a menu of available drugs, but an innocuous caption unrelated to drugs (Volteface, 2019).

The risks of buying drugs on social media are actually somewhat greater than buying drugs on the dark web. There are harm reduction practices that can be used when buying drugs on the dark web, for example reading reviews (which can't be deleted by the seller on most dark markets) and only buying from sellers who have lots of very recent reviews (Volteface, 2019). Social media can offer none of these assurances. Dealer accounts are likely to appear and disappear extremely swiftly and reviews can be made up and deleted by the account holder. Therefore, it's impossible to get a sense of the quality of the product before purchasing.

Additionally, dealers are targeting young people because they are looking for inexperienced customers—in my work with young people around substances, I've seen drugs sold in this way which have little or none of the substance they are sold as with prices which are higher than their general market value.

While we cannot and should not expect professionals to keep up to date with every possible risk young people may face on social media, let alone the abundance of platforms and apps they may be using, there is a need for some common myth busting to help professionals and parents/carers have relevant discussions with young people about risks such as these.

Safeguarding Young People's Rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the standard to which all those working with young people are expected to adhere. It is taught as part of safeguarding training and is referenced in everything from funding bids to youth clubs. This proliferation means that most professionals working with young people will have some experience of applying the rights listed in the convention to their real world, lived experience of work.

Within the digital world, however, the understanding and application of these rights are often poorly understood. The right covered by the UNCRC that professionals seem to struggle with the most in terms of young people's online activities though is the Right to Privacy (United Nations, 1989).

Interestingly, the young people we spoke to in the course of developing the tool had a very clear understanding of their right to privacy, at least from the eyes of their parents/carers, if not from wider institutions that would like to gather their data (Livingstone et al., 2018). In a

discussion with a group of 8- to 12-year-olds, the children were able to clearly articulate that they felt they should be allowed to keep messages to their friends private, because their parents/carers were able to do the same thing.

In the offline world, a child of this age would expect to spend time with their friends outside of the earshot of parents/carers. If they found a parent listening at their bedroom door, they would be upset and angry at this invasion of privacy. And yet parents/carers and professionals are often told that in order to protect children, we must track their online activities. This is promoted as essential for their safe development; however, the evidence is quite the opposite, and preventing children from exploring both on and offline can inhibit their development (Livingstone et al., 2018).

Talking to parents/carers of younger children, the complexity of this is apparent. We do not want children to be playing, unsupervised online— much as we would not want them left in the park unsupervised. But what do we mean when we talk about children's privacy?

Nissembaum defines privacy as "neither a right to secrecy nor a right to control, but a right to appropriate flow of personal information" (cited in Livingstone et al., 2018, 12). This helps us to navigate these murky waters.

We need to ensure children and young people know what supervision and oversight their parents/carers have over their online activities—and *why*—so that they are informed of the flow of information and can make informed decisions about what they do with it.

Managing the right to privacy is going to vary widely from the youngest age group up to the oldest. While an 8-year-old may accept that their parent/carer will read their messages from time to time, a 15-year-old is unlikely to accept the same treatment. Parents/carers may need advice from professionals about how to manage this. Unfortunately again, professionals' lack of confidence in this area is likely to interfere with their ability to appropriately offer this advice. Many professionals have asked me what tracking software they should recommend, what apps that limit internet usage are the best and how parents/carers can bypass a young person's password on a device.

These questions fundamentally undermine the right to privacy, and there are many apps that are willing to take parent's money with shady promises of "keeping young people safe".

I cannot stress how important it is to have conversations with young people about their online activities. If parents/carers use apps such as "Find My…" this should be discussed with the young person. Parents/carers should also be aware that young people can stop sharing their location if they wish, and that in reality these apps can only tell them the location of a device, not a young person. It doesn't require much cunning for a young person to realise that if they leave their phone with a friend, they can then roam around in places they are not meant to be without fearing the consequences. But we *should* fear the consequences of making young people so wary of being tracked that they decide to go somewhere risky without a way of calling for help.

If a parent/carer decides to track their young person's phone, or installs software enabling them to read messages, etc., even if this is done with the young person's knowledge, this should still be negotiable. If the young person is 13 and the parents/carers have reason to believe they may be facing or taking unacceptably high levels of risk it may be appropriate for parents/carers to set up location sharing and have rules about oversight of messages. But if the young person is 16 and has started a consensual sexual relationship with a peer, and has shown a responsible attitude to their sexual health, it would be highly inappropriate for parents/carers to continue monitoring their device.

Experiencing Online Abuse and Getting Support

Professionals and parents/carers have long been concerned about "cyberbullying". Reports of young people experiencing bullying online are often deeply disturbing, as the harassment is constantly with them—they do not get a reprieve when they leave school or college as they likely have a device with them at all times.

However, in the fear around online bullying, there is often a missed discussion about how young people can support one another online.

We get lost in the myriad risks and problems the online world causes in young people's lives and fail to see the benefits young people may experience from accessing online support.

I have seen young people access online support groups for issues as diverse as eating disorders, gender dysphoria and autism. These young people may find that there are no other young people near them with similar issues, particularly in a rural county like Cornwall where groups

that support, for example, transgender young people are often county-wide and may be difficult for young people to access with the support of a parent for transport.

These online support groups can offer a sense of belonging to young people, which is an especially strong driver in adolescence (Harris, 2013).

There are, of course, positives and negatives to online support groups. The positives include the lack of geographical or time boundaries (meaning people in different countries and time zones can connect to support one another), the ability to be anonymous—giving people the freedom to discuss issues with less fear of judgement and the ability to share experiences. The negatives include the possible "digital divide" (meaning those without access to the internet are further disadvantaged), lack of appropriate boundaries and the possibility of shared information being inaccurate (Kirk & Milnes, 2016). I have seen, for many of the young people I have supported, the positives may outweigh the negatives in cases where they feel unable to talk to friends or parents/carers about their concerns.

A great example of this is a trend which emerged on social media sites in 2020 of people talking about "finishing their shampoo and conditioner at the same time". I received a somewhat panicked email which had been circulated to hundreds (if not thousands) of professionals in Cornwall working with young people. The Blue Whale Challenge scare had just reared its head again, and this email explained that young people who say they had pasta for tea, or had finished their shampoo and conditioner at the same time, were using code to say they were feeling suicidal.

This isn't uncommon in youth work settings. Professionals often share information to help others decode the complex language young people use. However, this time I felt sad and frustrated that the whole point of this trend had been missed.

The idea came from a beautiful poem by Hannah Dains called "Don't Kill Yourself Today" (Dains, 2015), which had been going around on various social media platforms for a couple of years by the time the email landed in my inbox. I hadn't seen the trend on TikTok, but I had heard the poem, and knew immediately that this was likely the source of the trend.

When young people posted about this online, they would receive supportive, positive messages from people who understood (Tempesta, 2020), they understood because you would have to have an interest in

mental wellbeing for the poem to show up on your feed, and therefore, it was a way of asking for help from an already supportive audience.

Similarly, I have supported young people with eating disorders who have accessed pro-ana (pro-anorexia) websites initially as part of their disorder, but who have then continued to access these sites when they were in recovery as a way of reaching out to other young people who are experiencing the same issues they were.

Professionals may have a limited understanding of the support young people access online and are also likely to be relatively unaware of the risks. It is not enough to share information saying that if a young person talks about finishing their shampoo and conditioner at the same time they may be feeling suicidal, we need to have an understanding of what these memes *mean* to young people and what support they may be receiving through platforms professionals may only associate with risk.

In order to support young people, it's vital that professionals and parents/carers do not stop at the first question. Online support can be wonderful, or it can be extremely risky. We can only learn which it is through talking to young people about it. This should include talking about the risks and the benefits, as well as managing those risks, and how we can support them to do so.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the emerging issues young people face in their online lives. It is apparent that adults are often stuck using outdated or overly simplistic messages in an effort to keep young people safe. We need to move professionals and parents/carers on from these, giving them confidence to explore the issues with young people without being bamboozled by the technology. There is also a need to have clear messaging on which behaviours constitute high risk to young people, and which do not. It was this need that led to the development of the Online Resilience Tool. In the next chapter, we will start to explore the findings of the Headstart Kernow project, and how it fed into the development of the tool.

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