Helping young people think critically: misinformation and conspiracy theories online

Today's young people are growing up in a world where news, opinions and videos appear instantly - often before they've had time to think them through. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and X (Twitter) are now where many children get their information about the world.

What's the challenge? Not everything they see is true. Some of it is misinformation (false or misleading information) and some are conspiracy theories - such as ideas claiming secret groups or plots are controlling world events. These can spread quickly online, often designed to shock, anger or persuade.

Why young people are drawn in

It's natural for children to explore big questions and look for answers. Online content that sounds bold or mysterious can feel exciting and convincing- especially when it's presented confidently or emotionally.
Apps and algorithms can reinforce this by showing users more of the same kind of content they've watched before. For example:

- **TikTok** and **YouTube** use recommendation systems that can lead from harmless curiosity to more extreme or misleading videos.
- **Instagram** and **Snapchat** may spread rumours or fake stories quickly through friends' posts and private messages.
- **X (Twitter)** and **Reddit** often mix real news with speculation, which can make it hard for young people to tell fact from opinion.

The more time children spend on these platforms, the more normal this flood of conflicting information can feel.

A shared responsibility

If our young people are using social media, we can't control every video or post our they see, but we can teach them how to question and think critically about it. By staying involved, showing interest and keeping conversations open, parents and carers can help young people grow into informed, thoughtful digital citizens who can tell fact from fiction.

In this issue:
- Misinformation and conspiracy theories
- Unsupervised events

HOW PARENTS/CARERS CAN HELP

1. STAY CURIOUS, NOT CRITICAL

If your child mentions something unusual they've seen online, ask open questions: "Where did you see that?" or "What do you think about it?" Listening calmly shows you're interested, not judging or dismissing them.

2. TALK ABOUT HOW PLATFORMS WORK

Explain that social media apps want people to keep watching, so they show content that triggers strong reactions - even if it's misleading. Understanding how algorithms work helps children step back and think more clearly.

3. ENCOURAGE THEM TO CHECK SOURCES

Show your child how to look for information on trusted news websites or fact-checking pages like **Full Fact, BBC Verify or Newsround**. Ask: "Who made this?" and "What's their reason for posting it?"

4. SHARE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES

Talk about a time you believed something online that turned out to be false. It helps young people see that anyone can be caught out and that being willing to question and correct yourself is a strength.

5. PROMOTE BALANCE AND PERSPECTIVE

Suggest following a mix of reliable sources - news outlets, educators and positive creators - not just influencers or accounts that share dramatic opinions. Remind them it's healthy to switch off and do things offline too.

In a world full of loud voices, the ability to pause, question and think is one of the most powerful skills our children can learn.

SPOTLIGHT ON SAFEGUARDING

Staying safe at parties: helping young people make good choices

As children move through secondary school, their social life becomes a huge part of growing up. Parties, gatherings and sleepovers are where friendships deepen and independence grows, but they can also bring new challenges, especially when adults aren't around.

Unsupervised parties at a friend's house can seem harmless or 'normal', but without adults present, situations can quickly get out of hand. Alcohol, peer pressure and risky behaviour can all play a part, even when no one intends for things to go wrong.

The goal isn't to stop young people from socialising, it's to help them stay safe, make good choices and know they can always turn to you for help.

What makes unsupervised parties risky?

Even well-meaning plans can become unsafe when:

- alcohol or vaping is introduced
- word spreads on social media and far more people turn up than expected
- guests don't all know each other
- there's no adult to manage boundaries or call for help if needed
- peer pressure makes it hard for young people to say no.

Most young people want to do the right thing - they just need support, information and a plan.

What to do if you are hosting

If your child wants to have friends over, consider:

- Keeping the group small and supervised.
- Agreeing clear start and finish times.
- Keeping alcohol out of reach and monitoring any social media sharing.
- Being visible — even if you're just "around" in another room.

Stay connected and curious
Ask open questions about plans: "Who's going?", "What's the plan for the evening?", "Will an adult be there?" Show interest, not suspicion - you're trying to understand, not to control.

Plan how they can get home safely
Make sure your child knows how to reach you (or another trusted adult) at any time, no matter the situation. Agree on a code word or message they can use if they need help leaving discreetly.

Check the basics
Don't hesitate to contact the host's parents. A quick, friendly chat to confirm supervision, numbers and plans can prevent misunderstandings. Many parents feel relieved when someone else takes the first step.

Encourage them to look out for friends
Talk about the importance of staying together and checking that everyone gets home safely. Small acts of responsibility can make a big difference.

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT YOUR CHILD?

Talk about alcohol and boundaries
Be honest about the risks of drinking and make your expectations clear. Discuss how to handle peer pressure - for example, saying "I'm good, thanks," or blaming a parent rule can help them save face while making a safe choice.

Model trust, not fear
Let your child know you trust them - and that you'll always help if they find themselves in trouble. A calm response now makes it more likely they'll call you if they ever need help later.

The Enlightened Parent