Digitally Empowering Young People: The Podcast S1 E5 – Practical Parenting with Parent Zone

The founder and CEO of Parent Zone Vicki Shotbolt will provide helpful advice for parents/carers navigating digital family life.

BR Bibizadeh, Roxanne

Welcome back to a new podcast series that aims to draw awareness to the issue of self generated child sexual abuse imagery.

My name is Doctor Roxanne Bibizadeh and I'm joined here today with Vicki Shotbolt, the founder and CEO of parent zone, an organization that supports parents with their digital parenting.

Vicki also sits on the Executive board for the UK Council for Internet Safety, advising the government and the UK and internationally.

She is the co-chair of the Digital Resilience Working Group and a member of the DCMS Media Literacy Task Force.

We hope this episode of the podcast series will be particularly useful for parents and carers before we begin our discussion, listeners should be aware that this episode of the podcast series is not suitable for children and young people to hear.

We will be covering serious and distressing content which may be triggering, so if you have experiences relating to this topic, you may wish to consider whether you want to listen to this episode.

The final episode in the series will be designed for children and young people, and will feature contributions from all our special guests.

So thank you so much for joining us.

Vicki, to start us off, could you tell us a little bit about Parent Zone and how you came to found and run this social enterprise?

Shotbolt, Vicki

Absolutely. And thank you for inviting me on the podcast.

It's a really important issue that we're going to talk about, so I'm really pleased to be part of it.

I set up Parents Zone and this is going to start to make me sound old, but I set up parent zone in 2008 and at that time digital was really just starting to be a very significant part of family life.

And the reason that I set up Parents Zone was that I figured parents were going to need help because digital isn't a passive contributor to digital family life.

It changes the dynamics of families and it changes the information that comes into families in a way that we've never had to deal with before.

People sometimes talk about we were worried when the television arrived and

people were even worried when the radio arrived.

But digitally is more profound than that.

So I set up Parents Zone, anticipating that it was going to be tough for families and we wanted to be there to kind of hold their hand and also to work really closely with the tech companies so that families were being thought about when some of these services were being developed and to nudge policymakers to really think about what their responsibilities were going to be in terms of regulation.

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Bibizadeh, Roxanne

Wow.

And you've you must have seen such a radical transformation over the course of your time it would be wonderful to just hear how you have experienced that, that transition, the big moments.

I mean, we've had another big leap, really, haven't we with the pandemic?

Shotbolt, Vicki

We have.

We've had a huge leap with the pandemic and I think we've also had a huge leap. We've had so many.

I was gonna pick out one, but actually we've had so many significant moments.

I guess the one that's front of mind for me right now is that we've now got an online Safety Act and that's a really important piece of regulation.

It's going to be transformative, not just in terms of keeping children safer and holding tech companies to account, but also how we as families interact with technology.

So the Online Safety Act is massive, but it's also a massive shift in that if I think back to 2008, the message that we used to get was that you could only ever self regulate technology, technology moves so fast.

It was so complicated.

It was so important and innovative that the only thing we could do is to let it self regulate and I think that move now to a situation where we're saying no, that's completely wrong.

It has to have some regulation is a really positive one, and I remember talking about that in in 2008 and been really poo pooed the other huge sort of changes that we've seen have been the range of devices, the ages that children get them.

I remember my very first focus group with a group of parents and this is way back in 2003-2004 and we were talking about the Internet going mobile and smartphones. And for anybody that can remember David Beckham when he was at the height of his career, he used to promote what was known as a flip phone.

So apologies to anybody under the age of 30, he can't remember a flip phone, but he's to promote a flip phone and you couldn't get the Internet on it.

But it was the grooviest thing that anybody had ever seen.

And then Apple came along.

And they did the smartphone and it was, you know, transformative.

But I was talking to a group of parents about this idea that the Internet would be in your pocket.

That you'd be able to navigate it anywhere you were.

And they laughed.

I mean, they said, you know, why on Earth would we give a child a phone? What would they do with it?

Because it was such a new idea and you look at technology now, you Fast forward not that long, I mean 20 years, but not that long.

And you know it's it's very normal now for children in primary school to have smartphones.

So there's been a huge change in the digital ecosystem.

There's also been a huge change in thinking amongst policymakers and that's come together to bring us to, I think, a much better place.



Bibizadeh, Roxanne

And with that has come risks.

You know, different types of risks for young people and the focus of this podcast of course is self generated child sexual abuse material, which we know dramatically increased during and since the pandemic.

And I wanted to ask you because obviously the Internet Watch Foundation have recently created a home truths campaign which emphasises the home as one of the most challenging locations to keep children safe online.

So when parents and carers see messages such as make sure your home doesn't have an open door to child sexual abusers, how should they respond to a messaging like this?

Which is quite, you know, scary.



Shotbolt, Vicki

It is scary and it's really difficult.

The IWF is a very much at the sharp end they see the consequences.

They see the victims.

They are attempting and doing an incredible job actually of reducing that flow of

child sexual abuse images.

I think for parents who hear that kind of messaging, it's traumatizing.

And you know, that's a very strong word.

But I think it's true.

We both know because we are both parents, it's terrifying being a parent at the best of times and when you hear messages like, you know, don't let your house be an open door to child abusers.

Of course you're terrified.

And I think that's the first thing that I would say.

Don't be terrified.

Just be proactive and don't feel guilty.

It's not, you know, it's never, I struggle a little bit with the phraseology associated with this because self generated sexual images from children somehow feels as though it's the child who's doing something wrong and that they're choosing to do something that is problematic.

And of course, that's not true.

That's not true in any way, shape or form a young person who ends up sending a sexual image or creating a sexual image is a victim.

It's a person for whom something has gone wrong, somebody in their life, has encourage them groomed them.

Told them that creating these sort of images is OK and that's why they've done them.

So that self generated term that conjures up an idea of proactive youngsters in their bedroom doing something that's so awful is, I think, slightly misleading.

So I would say to parents, don't be misled.

Don't be terrified.

But do be aware, do be proactive and know that you can take steps to avoid this being your child.

But equally, if it does turn out to be your child it's never your fault and it's never the child's fault.

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Bibizadeh, Roxanne

Well, that's that leads me to one of our topics of discussion with all the other contributors have raised the problematic use of the term self generated and its association with shame and blame.

Many feel, we've discussed with many of the contributors what could an an alternative terminology look like and I wondered if you had some great advice for parents about how to when you hear messaging like don't let your home be and an open door for abusers and how what kind of language should we be using when we're discussing material like this or how might we better distinguish between material that a young person has generated, perhaps consensually in a in a relationship. And that's been shared without their consent, compared to because obviously the problem with self generated is it's also associated with an adult being involved in extorting and grooming a child to create that imagery. So it's a broad term which is where it becomes quite problematic, and that's something we've discussed with other contributors. And I wondered if you could add to that discussion.

Shotbolt, Vicki

It's interesting, isn't it?

Because I think.

It's also quite a technical term, you know, and I get that for organizations like that, IWF for law enforcement, it's important that you have a term that properly and accurately reflects what's happened.

And there is a difference between a self generated image and an image that's been taken by professional, professional or in the context of a of a grooming gang, for example, where an adults involved in producing the image, so you know it's those technical terms are important.

But when we're working with families, we tend to put the technical terms to one side because families don't talk in technical terms, they're not professionals.

They're experts at raising their own children, but they're not professionals, and it's not that helpful.

We prefer just to talk about sexual images, and I think if you simply talk about sexual images, you have a way in to talk to children about them.

And obviously, in an age appropriate way.

But if you're talking to a teenager about sex, talking about images that you might generate in the context of a relationship or girlfriend, boyfriend relationship, or any boyfriend, boyfriend or whatever the relationship might be, you have a way to include in that sexual discussion a discussion about the role of technology. If you start to introduce terms like you, it's a self generated image.

I think more than anything else, teens and young people just tend to look at you as though you've gone a little bit barking mad because they don't talk about back in the real world, which is a phrase we use a lot at Parent Zone, back in the real world, people don't talk about self generated sexual images.

They talk about sexual images.

They talk about pornography.

They talk about selfies.

They talk, you know, they talk about nudes, they have different language for this stuff.

And it's that language that we need to use when we're talking to young people.

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Bibizadeh, Roxanne

That's a great point.

Do you think that language could be used in in a different context in a more professional context as well, in the sense of you know, would it help for professionals working with young people to use that language so social workers or educational professionals? Do you think they should be utilizing the same language?

Shotbolt, Vicki

I think it's really difficult and context is everything as we as we know.

So the context for that language, if it provides clarity to a court of law, that's super important and we need to stick to the language and when something's gone wrong to explain to young people what that language is going to mean, should that situation end up in a court or, you know, as soon as that situation has been dealt with by a social worker or a law enforcement officer?

So I don't think we should shy away from it, but I do think we should explain it. And I do think the families, we should remember that it's not the language that's going to be appropriate in that context.

And so we need to be able to switch between the two.

Am I talking to somebody wearing my professional hat and do I therefore have the space and the capacity to explain why I'm using that language?

Or am I trying to reach a mum or a dad who we want to encourage to be a little bit aware of the potential for this to happen?

And if I wanna talk to them, I need to talk to them in the language that they understand.

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Bibizadeh, Roxanne

And turning now to talk about your most recent report, I know that Parents Zone undertake independent research into the issues affecting children, young people and their families, and the digital age.

And in your most recent report on financial harms for children, the dramatic year on year increase in sextortion was highlighted.

Could you expand a bit on the link between financial harms and self generated CSAM?

Shotbolt, Vicki

Yes, absolutely.

And I think it's a link that, you know, IWF have made very powerfully as well. And it's interesting.

We are currently running a consortium on Child Financial harms funded by Nominet and that includes PSHE association, Cifas, Dr David Zendle from York University, UK Finance, a group of experts coming from very different perspectives and what we are identifying is that finance and unsurprisingly actually I think most of us will go. Yeah, of course.

Finance plays a role in all sorts of different types of exploitation.

Because money is often the thing, I mean, there's that tired old phrase, isn't that? Follow the money.

Money is often the thing that encourages people to do things and and money because it's such a powerful motivator, especially in a cost of living crisis.

So we're not, I don't think exposing anything particularly new when we say that money has always been one of the ways that children are encouraged to, that's one of the ways that groomers groom children.

They're encouraged to do things that make them vulnerable or put them end up in that worst ever situation where they are victims of CSAM and the reasons for that are, you know, it used to start with a bag of sweets, didn't it? It used to be.

Don't take a sweet from a stranger now.

It might be an unsolicited payment.

It might be an unsolicited item in a game.

You know, virtual currencies make it incredibly easy for groomers to send a virtual gift to a young person, and as soon as that young person has accepted the gift, then the lever is there to put pressure on them to respond and the currency that abusers want is sexual imagery.

So it's an age old technique.

The Internet has simply made it way easier for groomers to use it.

Bibizadeh, Roxanne

I'm thinking about another report actually published.

In our case, it was yesterday on the 10th of January by the National Police Chief, Police Chiefs Council, Vulnerable Knowledge and Practice Program, a key point in the paper is that there is a significant proportion, 52% of self generated child sexual abuse material is child on child. And what does this tell us about contemporary relationships and how might this impact parenting and caring for young people?

So, specifically, the report states that children are offending against other children, and this makes up the majority of child sexual abuse material.

What does this tell us as parents and carers?

Shotbolt, Vicki

It's such an interesting question, isn't it?

And it's such a difficult one to really bottom out.

I think one of the things it tells us is that digital technologies has made it easy for children to do that.

So we've given them the means, first of all we've created the environment in which we've normalized that behaviour.

And by that I mean the hypersexualized digital world that they live in, the incredibly accessible amount of pornography that they consume.

So we've created a world that they observe and they see it as a sexualized world. And then we say to them, here's this device that you can use to replicate that sexualized world and participate in it.

And young people don't yet have the self regulation capabilities or their wider kind of set of understanding of the consequences of that kind of behaviour.

Is it any surprise, really, that young people have ended up behaving in these ways? We've always known that young people can be, you know, pretty appalling to each other in a analogue world.

We've just thrown petrol on that fire and I think that's what we're seeing.

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Bibizadeh, Roxanne

As a parent, is it about having open communication?

Is it about trying to talk about uh, whilst this might be somewhat of a norm per se, or that it might be something that they might think that their peers are doing and what can a parent or carer do to try to help young people I suppose understand what they're doing, but also understand the sort of long term consequences perhaps, which is such a hard thing for a young person to appreciate.

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Shotbolt, Vicki

I think typically.

It's a super, super hard thing for a young person to appreciate and I think it's a super hard thing for parents to do and that's what I was saying right at the

beginning about the enormous change that digital is brought to family life because it has changed the challenges that parents are facing in ways that make it incredibly tough.

I would say a few things.

The first is, don't be naive.

You know, it's lovely to imagine that our children grow up in a little bubble of safety and loveliness and that sex doesn't cross their doorstep until until you decide that they're old enough for sex to be part of their life.

But you cannot afford to be naive in this world because they are consuming content and information you probably wouldn't want them to, which means that you have to have good communication with them, and that communication has to go way beyond the boundaries that you probably feel comfortable with.

And that's tough, but you do need to be talking to your children about complex things like misogyny and power and all those really difficult things that play into making a young person less or more vulnerable.

And then the final thing that I would say is that this should not be something that parents have to grapple with alone, and that's where the Online Safety Act is so important, for years we've said parents just need to have open communication. And of course, that's true.

But crikey, it's like turning the tide with the teaspoon.

Parents need support, they need to know what their children have been taught in RSE in school and they need to be talking to policymakers, which is tough, I know, but even your local MP counts and saying this is not what I want.

The Online Safety Act is important.

I need the backup of regulation.

So, I think parents need to get militant is what I would say, militant and proactive.

BR Bibizadeh, Roxanne

And this leads nicely to my next question in a policy briefing paper we published a year or so ago I shared your recommendations that there is a need to rename online safety education that to even use that word online safety is going to mean that the shutters go down children and even adults are just going to switch off and that there is a real need to embed this education within every subject in the curriculum. And I wondered if you could share some advice on how we might address this increase in self generated CSAM through education, both within schools and in the home.

And I know you've touched on how a parent might do this. How might this be brought into schools?

Shotbolt, Vicki

I think that's such a great question and I think some steps have already been taken. So I think it was a really positive move that relationship and sex education was made statutory.

That's now part of the National curriculum, and that wasn't the case a few years ago.

I think that came in in 2022, although one of your listeners might correct me if it wasn't 22, it was either 21 or 23.

That's a really, really positive step.

The challenge is that teaching sex in schools is not without its controversies, and so doing that well and maintaining the support of parents is critically important. And I would say that you know, that's about sharing what's going to be taught providing parents with as much information as children are receiving and really getting buy in from the whole school community.

So I think that's a very, very good start.

But beyond that, we need digital to be part of every lesson, because it's relevant to whatever subject you're doing, whether it's maths or you know, geography. It doesn't really matter.

We should be including digital and all of the good things that it can bring and all of the challenges it can bring, and that includes, you know, financial exploitation of children and you know what the porn industry has done to sex is a topic that I would love to see being discussed.

Obviously with older children, I'm not suggesting that's a primary school subject, but we need it to permeate the whole curriculum.

Bibizadeh, Roxanne

I agree.

And having been a teacher myself, I can see how it would be guite intimidating for teachers to try, in any subject, to have to embed the digital.

Because typically it's always been in a computer science, a computer scientist will deliver this part of the curriculum, so that might be guite intimidating for teachers and it's typically something that is felt that I don't understand what's going on online how could I teach this?

But that's not, I know we've talked about that's not the correct attitude to have.



Shotbolt, Vicki

Yeah.

And I wonder whether sorry, I keep saying, let's get rid of that word.

I'll be left with hardly any words in my vocabulary if I'm not very, very careful, but I think digital maybe is a wee bit problematic because it's not the computer science piece that's important, it's the cultural change.

It's the economic changes.

It's the content that we're consuming.

It's how we interact with what we're seeing is, it's that stuff that matters.

I mean, you know, I nearly said, who cares how the machine works?

Of course we care, and that's gonna matter even more as we go into an AI world. But the computer science education piece that can stay in computer science, it's really important that we understand how algorithms work and how the digital world is built.

But the stuff that I'm talking about is the behavioral stuff.

It's the cultural stuff.

It's the content stuff, and that stuff has always been taught.

You know, every history teacher will have touched on those sorts of subjects.

Every politics teacher, I think teachers absolutely are well placed to deliver this stuff. But they need training, they need support and they need time.

And I think that's something that our national curriculum is not very good at providing.

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Bibizadeh, Roxanne

Turning now to think about it could be in a school setting or in a home setting. We've spoken with other contributors, and in particular we spoke with the Marie Collins Foundation who discussed that there are still high numbers of victims who delay disclosure, proving many continued to suffer in silence.

How can we create a safe and supportive context for children who have fallen victim to child sexual abuse imagery?

How can we create a supportive environment for them to feel comfortable to come forward?



Shotbolt, Vicki

Gosh, you are asking me some exceptionally difficult questions and I think one of the things that I'm sure you heard this through your research as well, children feel that they lose power when they disclose and that's true. They do, you know, once the words have come out of your mouth and you've told somebody that this has happened, a process takes over that feels like a runaway train for a young person.

They worry that you know, they don't want their parents necessarily to be told they don't want to find themselves having to relive the whole experience.

They are terrified that they are going to be blamed, and they probably blame themselves already.

You know there are so many factors that make disclosure feel difficult and terrifying. And I think if we could tackle that, if we could make help seeking behaviour normal and a positive experience that left children feeling as though they still had some power, they still had some choice and they still they were going to be nurtured and looked after and, you know, wearing my digital resilience hat, there was gonna be support to help them recover.

It's those positive outcomes that we need to offer to children in order to overcome the fear, the shame, the messaging that they get from their groomers. We need to balance that messaging with a positive offer.

Bibizadeh, Roxanne

I know that it's been discussed that there's this concern about losing their devices for example.

And the loss of that contact with the outside world or in some way being and in in that loss, it's a sense of you are suffering further after you've been a victim.

But in terms of what happens, what do you think should happen next?

How might a parent or carer or an educational professional law enforcement, how should they be responding?

What's the kind of language they should be using when a young person does come forward?

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Shotbolt, Vicki

First of all, I would say, you know, parents are human beings who care more deeply for their children than anything else in their lives.

And so I can think of many a parent who has found themselves in that situation, who hasn't responded quite as they might wish that they had because they themselves are upset and traumatized.

And I think we ignore the fact that a parent whose child has been abused finds themselves in an incredibly traumatic situation.

So parents don't beat yourself up if the first words out of your mouth haven't been the ones that you with the benefit of hindsight wish had come out, I think what we're all aiming for when a child has been a victim of this sort of situation or where something has gone wrong I mean, you know, I keep talking about groomers and younger children, but it might be an older teen who's what they thought was a loving boyfriend has ended up onward sharing an image that wasn't consensually shared.

What you need in that situation is support, care, recovery, understanding. The last thing you need is to be told that you've been an idiot, or that you shouldn't have sent it, or you know, I'm gonna take your device away because you can't be trusted with it.

That's the last thing that you need.

You need the people around you to understand that you have been a victim of some appalling behaviour and that's the person that deserves to have their devices taken away and to be told that they have done something wrong.

What you need as the victim is help, support, understanding, care and a knowledge that you can recover.

And I think for far, far too long, we've told people what goes online stays online. You can never get these images back.

It's a disaster and you know that messaging isn't untrue, but it's not very helpful when a young person actually needs is recovery.

They need to know that life will resume and they can get through it and they will be helped, and it will be OK.



Bibizadeh, Roxanne

Well, that's really excellent advice for all I think. I want to turn now to something that whenever we've discussed with the other contributors, everyone's in a way, I guess a little stumped there is this disturbing new threat posed by AI generated CSAM.

What should parents and carers know about this?

How might we help keep children and young people safe?

Shotbolt, Vicki

Stumped is a very good word, isn't it?

I think the world at large is feeling a little bit stumped by AI and the potential that it has for good and evil.

And I think actually for parents thinking about their young people.

It comes back to what sort of content are young people seeing and consuming and, knowing that AI has the potential to generate deep fakes, including deep sexualized fakes is just another thing that a parent needs to be aware of and needs to make sure that their children are not seeing and consuming.

That's not easy.

Technically, it's not easy to filter out that kind of content, but at the moment I don't think we have much of a defence against AI generated CSAM to be quite frank. So all we can do at this stage is to have the conversations try and keep it away from our children's eyes and certainly let your children know that it exists and that they shouldn't be attempting to generate it themselves.

Bibizadeh, Roxanne

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I'm just thinking about three different sort of scenarios I suppose one being that sometimes young people's response when it is identified that an image has been created a sexual image of them has been created.

The response sometimes is from a young person.

It's AI generated whether it is or it isn't.

So that's something that young people might even utilise as a defense in that circumstance, which I found quite interesting to hear.

Another being played out in this very moment when a child is playing in virtual reality game and for example they have an avatar which experiences some form of abuse upon them.

How is a parent to help young person sort of manage and recover from an event such as that, and to be aware that this can could happen and what are the consequences of something and what can we do about something like that? And then I suppose there's the difficult issue of as a parent.

If you're sort of taking your child or young adult to clubs or various things that young people do, and as a parent you might take them to their classes and images are taken of them and utilized quite innocently on a Facebook group for that class. Understanding that that imagery could, is it right for us to be so concerned that we would be saying no, we're not giving consent for you to take an image of my child and put that online because that could be used.

So there's all these kind of difficult scenarios that AI is creating that we don't have any answers of how we are supposed to help a young person navigate this whole new I don't know if the right word is world really.

Shotbolt, Vicki

I think, yeah, that's a whole new context, it's a whole new set of challenges. I'm going to split that question in in two if I may.

The one about should you give consent for your child to have their photo taken? I have been hard line on this since forever. For me the answer is no.

I do not think that a child's image is safe online and I know that's a very extreme position to take, but I was that child who hated having their photo album brought out and shown to the boyfriend.

Aunties, you know, anybody that my mother could put it in front of? I absolutely hated it.

I regarded it as part of my private life.

It did terrible things to my self-esteem because you know the young me with the bad haircut just made me feel miserable.

And if I felt like that in an analog world, I have never thought that it was right for parents to profligate with the taking of their children's images, putting it up online when they have literally no way of knowing whether their child will be happy with it at a future point in their life.

So for just very mundane reasons, I have always been really concerned about people putting children's images online too much.

And if you add into that mix now AI, there are very, very good reasons for saying that the likelihood of a child's image being manipulated using AI is now high enough for it to be something that we shouldn't facilitate in any way shape or form.

And the best line of defense is to not put your kids images up online.

So I'm a little bit hard line on that and I know this is a choice for every individual parent and I would defend the parents right to do whatever they want to do with their child's images.

For me personally, I think it's a high risk activity.

The question about if your child's had a negative experience in VR, one that isn't a real experience that I use that word with extreme caution because it is real, if you're the young person's avatar in that virtual space, it feels real to you, you experience it as though it was real.

I go back to the work that we do on the Digital Resilience Working group and the development of that as a concept.

What is digital resilience?

I've always thought this is a really clunky phrase, but it's a dynamic personality asset and that asset word is so important.

Assets like self-esteem, self-confidence, feeling loved, those personality assets that you build up in a child are super important.

And if anything undermines one of those assets, it's your job as a parent to try and boost it.

So if your child feels upset because an avatar has been hurt, then it's that upset, you need to deal with.

It doesn't matter whether to you it was a real experience or not, doesn't matter whether to law enforcement, it was a real experience or not.

The only thing that matters is whether there's been an attack on one of your child's important personality assets, and if there has, then you have to take it seriously and you have to do everything you can to nurture the recovery of that of that asset. And so VR is real life for a person who's in it, whether you're a young person or an older one.



Bibizadeh, Roxanne

Thank you.

That's some fantastic advice for some very difficult questions and scenarios.

I suppose that that at people are grappling with everyday.

So finally, before we conclude this podcast, because I think I feel I've been grilling you a little bit before we conclude this podcast.

Is there anything else you feel a parent or carer should know about self generated CSAM?

Shotbolt, Vicki

I think you have been grilling me a little bit.

And I suppose as I always do, I I just like to remind parents that young people are extraordinary, and this generation of young people is particularly extraordinary. They are doing incredible things.

There are drinking less.

They're doing drugs less, they're achieving well at school, you know, do keep in mind that we are doing a great job on the whole and young people themselves are doing a fantastic job on the whole but it's a difficult world for them to grow up in and this difficult world now includes a significant amount of child sexual abuse material online and you need to know that as a parent because knowledge is power. As soon as you know that, you can start to nurture those personality assets that mean that your child is less likely to be a child who ends up involved in that behaviour.



Bibizadeh, Roxanne

Well, thank you so much, Vicki, for your contribution today and thank you to all of our listeners for engaging with our podcast.