

Parents and carers

The trust trap: navigating friendships, pressure and manipulation online

This webinar summary outlines how manipulative online behaviours can occur within platonic adolescent friendships.

Adolescent brain development

- During adolescence the brain undergoes a rewiring process that helps the brain transition from childhood to more mature adult thinking.
- During the process, the frontal lobe (the front of the brain) is still developing, which means impulse control, decision making, and emotion regulation skills are still maturing.
- The brain's reward system is in overdrive. Quick reactions and instant feedback feel especially powerful.
- During this time adolescents start to pull away from family and shape their identity, self-esteem and belonging outside the home.
- Peer relationships become a greater source of attachment, security, and validation, compared to their family.

Friendships

- Most friendships contain both positive and negative elements.
- With online and offline interactions constantly overlapping, the shifts between positive and negative elements can feel even greater.
- Young people manage their own friendships but also watch other friendships play out in real time.
- Communication platforms play a big role in shaping how young people think friendships should work. Many young people pick up unspoken 'rules' – like replying quickly so they don't seem uninterested or liking and commenting on a friend's posts to show loyalty.



Harmful online behaviours

There are many forms of harmful online behaviour. Digital features often amplify tactics also seen offline.

- Harmful online behaviours can be exploitative and includes sexual grooming, cyberbullying or peer-to-peer abuse.
- Manipulation is a specific pattern of behaviour that aims to shift control, dodge accountability, or influence others unfairly. It involves using emotional, verbal, or behavioural tactics to influence others online, usually without being direct.
- Adolescent peer-to-peer manipulation may be linked to competition for social status, popularity and acceptance by peers.

Gendered nature of manipulative friendships

- **Girls:** manipulative behaviour may be more covert, subtle, indirect, and easy to deny. It can look like exclusion, silent treatment, guilt tripping, rumours, or shifting group dynamics to isolate someone.
- **Boys:** manipulative behaviour may be more overt, direct and visible. It might show up as open competition, teasing, calling each other out publicly, or using dominance in spaces like sport, gaming, or group chats where status is tied to performance or risk taking.

Patterns of online peer manipulation

- Closeness followed by sudden withdrawal.
- Public performance of loyalty or 'ownership'.
- Pressuring someone to limit or end other friendships.

The experiences of neurodivergent young people

Some neurodivergent young people may interpret social situations differently, which can sometimes make it harder to recognise or respond to manipulative behaviours from peers, for example:

- taking things literally
- having difficulty recognising social hierarchies
- experiencing challenges reading social/emotional cues.

Relational trauma

When harm comes from people a young person trusts, like their close friends or peer groups, relational trauma can occur. The impacts are amplified because it happens at a time when the brain is wiring itself around belonging, identity, and self-worth. Relational trauma during adolescence embeds itself deeply and its impacts often spill into adulthood. This type of trauma may present in a variety of ways, including:

- feelings of profound distress that harm self-worth and belonging
- anxiety, depression, loneliness, shame and withdrawal
- feeling constantly insecure with friendships.

Warning signs of online peer manipulation

- Sudden withdrawal from specific apps or chat groups.
- Obsessive checking of phones.
- Emotional volatility after online activity.
- Defensiveness or secrecy around specific peers or messages.

Tips for parents and carers

Providing support and conversation prompts

Create emotional safety: extend the feeling of ‘you’re safe with me’.

- ‘You don’t have to explain anything before you’re ready. I’m here, and you’re not in trouble.’
- ‘You’re safe to talk to me about this.’
- ‘You get to share this at your own pace.’

Invite conversation: open the conversation without pressure.

- ‘I’m curious...what’s been the best and hardest part of being online this week?’
- ‘How have things been going with your friends online?’
- ‘Is there anything that’s felt confusing or uncomfortable online?’

Validate their experience: show you’re listening and taking it seriously.

- ‘That makes a lot of sense. I understand why you’re feeling upset. What do you need from me right now?’
- ‘Anyone in your situation would find that hard.’
- ‘Your feelings are completely understandable.’

Focus on their feelings: help them name what’s happening internally.

- ‘What emotions are coming up for you? Sadness, anger, fear, surprise...’
- ‘Where do you feel that in your body?’
- ‘Has this feeling been building for a while?’

Co-create gentle boundaries: problem solve together.

- ‘What would help you feel calmer or safer when you’re online with XXX?’
- ‘What boundaries would make things feel fairer or more comfortable for you?’
- ‘If we were to make a small change that would help you feel more in control online, what would it be?’

eSafety resources

[Young people](#) – useful information to help young people stay safe online. Information can be filtered by ‘Dating and relationships’, ‘Navigating difficult situations’, ‘Protecting yourself online’, and ‘Self-identity and community’.

[Coercive control](#) in teen dating relationships – information on a pattern of abusive behaviour used to control someone within an intimate relationship through manipulation, pressure and fear.

[Advisories and blogposts](#)

[Webinars for Educators and Youth serving professionals](#)

[Webinars for Parents and carers](#)

Reporting online harm

You can help young people collect evidence and report to eSafety if it is part of **cyberbullying** that targets someone under 18, or **image-based abuse** (sharing or threatening to share, an intimate image or video without **consent** of the person shown).

Find out more at [Report online harm](#).

Getting support

If a young person is being affected by manipulative behaviours in a friendship, you can support them to seek confidential advice from:

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 – 24 hours a day, seven day a week – Phone and webchat 5- to 25-year-olds

headspace 1300 650 890 – Online and telephone services 12- to 25-year-olds

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