

# The 'aggro-rithm': what parents need to know about harmful content

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Chances are you've heard of Netflix's recent searing drama *Adolescence*. The show examines the fallout after a 13-year-old boy is arrested for the murder of a schoolmate, through the lens of social media and online bullying. Chances are, however, you may not have heard of the 'aggro-rithm.'

The term refers to the pushing of content promoting misogyny or violence to boys following completely innocent and unrelated searches. According to research, boys aged 11-14 are exposed to harmful content within 30 minutes of being online, with one-in-10 seeing it in as little as 60 seconds.

The findings, part of research carried out last year by Vodafone, found that "over half (52 pc) were aware of and had engaged with content from influencers with ties to the manosphere; a term used to describe the network of online communities responsible for creating and promoting negative, often misogynistic content."

The statistics are frightening enough in themselves, but when viewed alongside *Adolescence* they take on a deeper resonance. It's not hard to see why some parents are panicking, believing the 'Aggro-rithm' is making the online space a wholly unsuitable one for their children. However, according to the research, the real story is not so universally bleak.

## Bullying

Professor James O'Higgins Norman, UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying and Director of the DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, has worked extensively in this space and is more optimistic about the realities children are experiencing online.

"The most recent Government-funded research in Ireland found that most children are positive about the internet and say there are good elements for their age," he explains. "Forty-four per cent say this is very true and 39pc say it is fairly true. Just 13pc of children aged 9 to 17 have experienced something in the last year that bothered or upset them."

DCU Anti-Bullying Centre's own research backs up the wider statistics, with 6.4pc of post-primary students reporting having been bullied online.

Liz Roche, head of the Vodafone Foundation who has worked with DCU in this space, and is a mum of three boys herself, is quick to reassure worried parents. "The advice I give to parents and something I go back to as a parent myself is, largely the experience of your kids and young people online is going to be positive," she says.

The numbers may give parents

pause to breathe, but many could be left wondering if children are simply not verbalising their negative experiences of the internet.

"If parents can develop and maintain an ongoing open and non-judgemental conversation with their children it will be easier for them to ask for help when they need it," says Professor O'Higgins Norman.

"But if children and adolescents think that telling their parents will result in losing access to their phones, they will be less likely to report negative experiences."

Anyone who is a parent of teenagers will tell you talking is not always their strong suit. Still, Gina Dermody, Clinical Director of *Adolescence and Beyond*, and adolescent, young adult, and family psychotherapist believes they will be honest when the environment is supportive.

"Children and adolescents are bright and often know right from wrong and recognise uncomfortable and difficult feelings," she says.

For her, we can no longer ignore that we are all living digital lives and must add good digital habits into family life.

"Phone management needs the same routine as brushing teeth, eating greens, and being open and honest," explains Dermody. "Regular repeatable boundaries and discussions of device use is a priority as well as good safe guidelines being set by parents."

Healthy digital habits don't just mean good communication, it means parents must boost their digital literacy too. "There's such a massive range of parental control options [on smartphones] parents can use. It's like having a second eye," explains Liz Roche, whose 12-year-old has recently gotten a phone, so she's even more cognisant of what she needs to be watching out for.

"It's about what controls do I have on the device, things like securing it, limiting screen time, limiting content categories. How can you build up your own awareness, education, and tools so that you know the steps you can take to help them?"

For Professor O'Higgins Norman, the most important takeaway for parents from the latest discussions around the rise of the 'aggro-rithm' is not to make knee-jerk reactions. "Communicate, listen, don't judge, and educate yourself about whatever the latest apps are online, but avoid surveillance and instead support children."

The DCU Anti-Bullying Centre together with the ISPCC and the Vodafone Foundation recently created a digital wellbeing app for 11 to 14-year-olds called Tozi. The app is a new addition to a growing number of resources to help parents and children navigate the online world.