UNDERSTANDING ONLINE DISINHIBITION

A Parent Guide for Families

Children today spend a large part of their lives online learning, playing, chatting and exploring. While the internet offers huge benefits, it also changes the way children think, feel and behave. One important idea that helps families understand this is online disinhibition.

WHAT IS "ONLINE DISINHIBITION"?

Online disinhibition is when a person behaves differently online compared with how they behave in real life. Be Web-Safe describes it as is "a temporary loss of inhibitions caused by an outside stimulus" — in this case, the online world. The disinhibition effect can be understood as a person shifting online, to behaviours that are different from the real world version of themselves." Anyone who spends time online may become:

- Braver or more confident
- More impulsive
- More open or oversharing
- Less cautious with strangers
- Unkind in ways they wouldn't be face-to-face

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Professor John Suler's research identifies eight reasons people feel different online:

ANONYMITY
"You don't know me."
Children feel hidden, which can lead to oversharing or pretending to be someone else.

INVISIBILITY
"You can't see me."
Without eye contact, empathy drops.

ASYNCHRONICITY
"See you later."
Messages don't happen in real time, so children don't see the impact of their words.

FANTASY
"It's all in my head."
Children imagine the other person differently.

IMAGINARY PERSONA
"It's just a game."
They may act as a different version of themselves.

PERCEIVED PRIVACY
"It's just between you and me."
Children may believe conversations are private when they are not.

ALTERED AUTHORITY
"We are equals."
Children may feel on the same level as adults or strangers online.

SOCIAL FACILITATION
"Everyone else thinks it's ok."
Seeing others behave in certain ways online normalises it.

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF ONLINE DISINHIBITION:

With BENIGN DISINHIBITION children may:

- Open up more
- Ask for help
- Express themselves confidently
- Join in more easily
- Share interests more openly

With TOXIC DISINHIBITION children may:

- Say unkind things
- Take risks
- Share personal information
- Engage with strangers
- Access harmful content

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE FOR CHILDREN?

- Accepting friend requests from strangers
- Sharing personal information
- Being drawn into unkind group chats
- Saying things online they'd never say in person
- Oversharing feelings or photos
- Feeling braver or more reckless behind a screen

HOW CAN FAMILIES HELP?

- Talk openly about online behaviour
- Remind children not to chat with strangers
- Encourage telling an adult if it feels wrong
- Restrict location sharing
- Model healthy digital habits
- Reinforce the WEB-SAFE message: Safe | Appropriate | Friendly | Educated

IN SUMMARY

When children go online, the screen can make them feel different — braver, bolder, or less cautious. Understanding this helps us guide them to Be WEB-SAFE.

SAFE | APPROPRIATE | FRIENDLY | EDUCATED