



GW Theatre Company

Mister Shapeshifter



Education Through Theatre

West Yorkshire Project 2018 Funded by



Office of the
**Police & Crime
Commissioner**
West Yorkshire

Independent Evaluation Report

Dr Donna Peach



Acknowledgement

Thank you to everyone who kindly gave their time to contribute to the learning gained during this evaluation.



“The play is outstanding and I would like to plan something on a larger scale for the cluster.”

*Bankside School, Leeds,
West Yorkshire*



Contents

Title	Page
Executive summary	4
GW Theatre Company	5
Mr Shapeshifter: Context and background	6
The context of child abuse	10
Teachers as trusted protectors	11
Children as active agents	12
Conclusion	15
References	16
Appendices	17



Executive Summary

Based in Greater Manchester, GW Theatre Company and writer Mike Harris have been producing issue-based dramas to educate and empower young people for 30 years. Their aim is to produce vivid and memorable plays which tackle pressing social issues. Since 2015 the company has been touring a production called 'Mr Shapeshifter' which looks at the way some adults abuse children's trust and how children can protect themselves. This is an independent evaluation report on performances of the play in West Yorkshire schools, funded by the West Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner's Office.

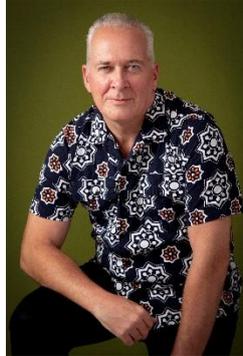
'Mr Shapeshifter' is an original piece of theatre which is powerfully emotive both in its message and performance. The script extends and transforms the traditional Grimm brothers 'fairy-tale' integrating the tragedy awaiting children at the hands of crooked adults portrayed by the Pied Piper of Hamelin and the witch in Hansel and Gretel. In doing so, it reminds the audience that stories have an enduring legacy of being a vehicle in which to convey to children that some adults present a risk to their safety and wellbeing.

During the evaluation respondent children commented that 'Mr Shapeshifter' was "scary". However, the play encouraged them to use their voices to stop his behaviour, which they demonstrate, despite feeling scared, they are emboldened to do. The learning themes integral to 'Mr Shapeshifter' include an understanding of the complexity of adult behaviour. Importantly the play demonstrated that adults are protective, but that sometimes adults fail to listen to children. The production also sensitively depicts how some adults can deliberately hurt children and will manipulate other adults to prevent being brought to justice. In addition, the play demonstrates the danger of online activity giving particular attention to communicating with people that you do not know and the sending of pictures of oneself. In addition, the play addresses the bullying that can occur between children, especially when they have been affected by their own difficult experiences.

The play serves to empower children in their capacity to understand when the behaviour of a person is wrong. A mantra throughout the play is "*If something doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't*". The interactive basis of the play also encouraged children to vocalise responses and ask questions at specific parts of the performance. Indeed, in one pivotal moment it is common for the children in the audience to shout aloud to alert the children in the story of a present danger from the shapeshifter, which the GW Theatre company state serves to reduce the length of the scripted scene by several lines because the audience takes control to stop the shapeshifter. GW Theatre Company works hard to ensure that the children can distinguish between make-believe and real life. 'Mr Shapeshifter' supports an emotional and psychological exploration that demonstrate most adults are safe but that adults who want to hurt children can take the shape of strangers, teachers, police officers and parents. The power imbalance for children in these relationships is evident and the play examined this by repeatedly demonstrating the importance of children telling adults of their worries until they find one who responds to help them. The lessons to be learned are for children and adults alike, *if something doesn't feel right, tell someone about it and keep repeating yourself until you are heard.*



GW Theatre Company



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Mr Shapeshifter: Context and background

Based in Greater Manchester, GW Theatre Company and writer Mike Harris have been producing issue-based dramas to educate and empower young people for 30 years. Their aim is to produce vivid and memorable plays which tackle pressing social issues. In part this is to engage the audience in the play to aid learning but they assert it also serves to demonstrate to the 'hardest sceptics' that theatre is a powerful educational teaching and learning method. That view is supported by research evidence undertaken by Duatepe-Paksu and Ubuz (2009) who suggest drama facilitates engagement in the learning process as its capacity to contextualise knowledge within a stimulating learning environment helps to improve understanding.

Notably, drama has been used successfully to help educate children as young as 5 years old about issues of child protection (Orme & Salmon, 2002). 'Mr Shapeshifter' is an original piece of theatre which is powerfully emotive both in its message and performance. The script extends and transforms the traditional Grimm brothers 'fairy-tale' integrating the tragedy awaiting children at the hands of crooked adults portrayed by the Pied Piper of Hamelin and the witch in Hansel and Gretel. In doing so, it reminds the audience, that stories have an enduring legacy of being a vehicle within which to convey to children that some adults present a risk to their safety and wellbeing.

'Mister Shapeshifter' is an exciting, very contemporary fairy tale for 9-11 year-olds about the way some adults abuse children's trust and how children can protect themselves. The purpose of the play is to entertain, inform and safeguard children against risk and danger in real life and online and to provide a catalyst for further work by teachers and other adults with the children who see it. The work in WY is part of an ongoing commitment in the region to keep young children safe from CSE/CSA through the delivery of prevention work which builds knowledge, resilience, critical thinking and digital literacy. The 'Mr Shapeshifter' project is one component of this work.

Scene from 'Mr Shapeshifter' as his power to steal children's childhood is drained away.

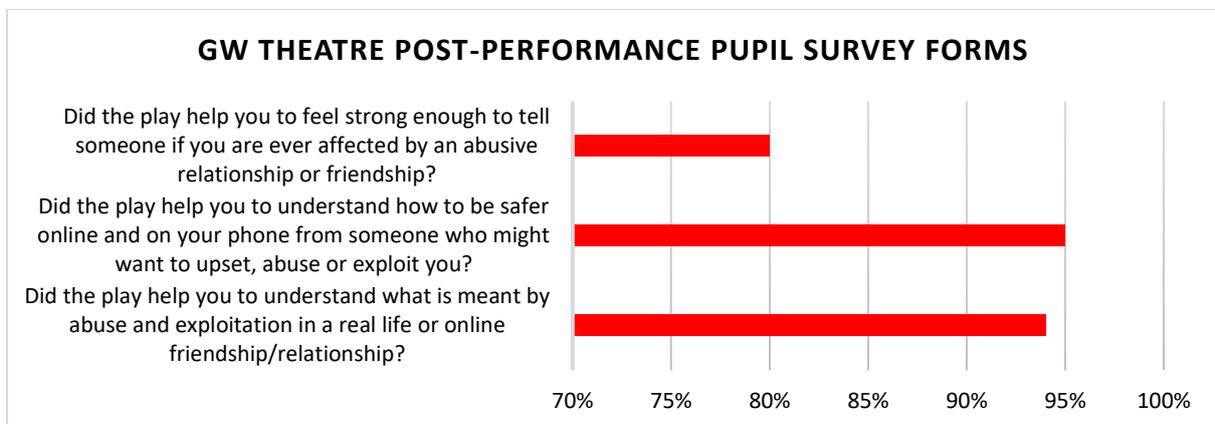




The following package is/was delivered in each participating school:

- Pre-performance information and context.
- Pre and post-lesson outlines [delivered by teachers].
- ‘Mr Shapeshifter’ performance, followed by character ‘hot-seating’ and open questions [delivered by GW Theatre Company].
- Post-performance surveys completed by pupils [See Appendix One].

Since 2015, GW Theatre has been touring the ‘Mister Shapeshifter’ theatre production into primary schools in many different local authority areas, but this evaluation report focuses on a specific project being funded by the West Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner [WY OPCC] – involving 40+ performances of the play being delivered across all five West Yorkshire boroughs [Bradford, Wakefield, Kirklees, Calderdale and Leeds] in the year 2018-2019. The participating schools are/were not identified by GW Theatre but by key agencies and appropriate professionals in each of the five local authority areas e.g. safeguarding teams/hubs. No school is/was compelled to take delivery of the project. A number of performances were attended and supported by school nurses, Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards [LSCB] leads and officers, and police community support officers [PCSO’s].



To build on the success of the theatre production, to deepen its impact and provide a legacy of the work, WY OPCC has commissioned GW Theatre to produce a short-animated version of the play – which will be launched in January 2019. This completely new and unique resource will further support children who have already seen the play. More significantly though, it will open up great potential to reach children who are not in mainstream educational settings – including the very vulnerable and at risk. More significantly again, it has been deliberately designed to facilitate engagement and work with parents, carers and families – and also with other adults in the wider community.

Children know who the safe adults in their lives are, but they may not know that there are adults who intend to hurt them. GW Theatre recognised the complexity of delivering these sensitive messages to young children who have varying degrees of awareness and knowledge. In recognition of this the play is deliberately intended to be understood and used by teachers and other adults in at least three different ways:

1. As a modern fairy tale about storytelling in which two kids defeat an evil 'super villain'.
2. As a play about power and control; specifically, about how some adults abuse their power and the trust children place in them. It is also, perhaps more importantly, about how children might detect when that is happening, and thus protect themselves. It's also about knowing who to trust when you need help.
3. As an extended metaphor for child sexual abuse (CSE) and therefore like (2) above it's about how children might detect when it is happening, and thus protect themselves and also about knowing who to trust when you need help.

GW Theatre takes a deliberate stance in not naming the type of abuse experienced by the children in the story. Instead they use the term 'stealing children's childhood' permitting the audience to project their own knowledge and understanding on what harm the children in the story have suffered.

Importantly, GW Theatre encourages children's interaction during the play. This begins with getting them to use their voice by loudly shouting out 'hello' to the cast of actors before the play begins. The children observe the actors moving around the 'stage' before the actors introduce themselves and explain what character they are going to play. In my view, this is important as it demonstrates to the children that they are not the characters and that the play is 'make believe'. This provides a vital element of protection if any of the children feel scared or anxious during the play. In feedback children commented that 'Mr Shapeshifter' was 'scary'. However, the play encourages them to use their voices to stop his behaviour which they demonstrate they are emboldened to do.

Following the conclusion of the play, the two actors who play the role of the children Jess and Jack remain in character to answer questions from the children, a process referred to as 'hot-seating'. The characters answer questions directly, but the theatre company also take the opportunity to reaffirm key messages from the play. If the questions from the children do not reach the intended scope of the play the company facilitates further questions and discussion to ensure that all messages are brought to the surface and repeated. Finally, all the actors all come out of character and relate to the children to reinforce the 'make believe' aspect of the play

Direct feedback from schools visited can be seen on the GW Theatre website www.gwtheatre.co.uk/shows/mr-shape-shifter

The messages from 'Mr Shapeshifter' include:

- ❖ Most adults are safe, can be trusted and are there to support children.
- ❖ Children should recognise the behaviour of adults and not their official position.
- ❖ The importance of speaking to a trusted adult
- ❖ Some adults intentionally hurt children.
- ❖ Children will use internet-based apps and games unaware that some adults will pretend to be children online.
- ❖ Some children will bully other children who they think are acting 'weird'. There are reasons why this happens but it is complicated.
- ❖ 'If something doesn't feel right – then it probably isn't'. This is a message both for children and adults.
- ❖ Being hurt and then not listened to can make children feel that they are 'bad and mad'.
- ❖ Some adults don't listen to children's concerns. If that happens children need to keep telling adults until one of them responds. Persist until someone helps.

The children responded positively it really made them think and consider the actions that they take. There was a point when the play became quite 'dark' but the script and the actors were able to use this feeling to emphasise the central message about 'if it feels wrong and weird...'. The contrast of light and dark within the play – the pace and characterisations were very appropriate. The script dealt with a difficult subject well. I think it was good that the children completed preparation work in advance and then the post play survey. This meant the children did not just see the play as entertainment. The hot seating supported this too.

**Airedale Primary School,
Wakefield**



The context of child abuse

The Children's Commissioner for England (CCE) second annual Vulnerability Report (2018) asserts that in a typical classroom of 30 children:

- ❖ 15 would have experienced bullying at some point
- ❖ 3 would have a limiting long-term health condition
- ❖ 8 children will have a parent with a mental health need

Shockingly, the report shows that 2.1 million children and young people living in families with complex needs. Furthermore, it is worrying that 1.6 million of those children do not have access to a nationally recognised form of support. The CCE is careful to recognise that living with vulnerability does not necessarily equate to a poor childhood experience as other factors can be present which provide compensatory care and support. However, she also notes that the impact for many children living with enduring insecure and unpredictable family experiences can lead to psychological and physical harm.

In England, the incidence of child abuse and neglect remains high, the NSPCC (2015) report 57,000 children are viewed as being in need of protection. It is a further concern that both the NSPCC (2013) and the Children's Commissioner (2016) estimate that we are failing to identify 7 out of 8 children who are being abused.

Children require adults to protect them, which includes educating them to know they have a right to be safe. It is important that children know they have this right and have trusting relationships with the adults who can safeguard their needs (Cossar, Brandon & Jordan, 2014). In my view, primary schools that commission plays such as 'Mr Shapeshifter' are not only demonstrating the above, in addition they are acting positively to counter a system that too often fails children. In CCE's (2018) own words:

I remain as ambitious for children as ever, but I am increasingly frustrated by the number of vulnerable children who cannot meet their own ambitions because they are let down by a system that doesn't recognise or support them; a system that leaves these children, and their families, to fend for themselves, until things have got out of hand and crisis hits.

**Anne Longfield, OBE
(2018, p.3)**

It is vital to recognise where we are failing to recognise and meet the needs of children and families who are vulnerable. Equally, there is a responsibility to recognise the impact of social policies and austerity that contribute to this vulnerability.



Simultaneously, research was undertaken by Bilson and Martin (2016) and reports on the huge increase in children subjected to a child protection investigation who were not found to be experiencing abuse.

If we recognise that harm can be experienced by families who are incorrectly suspected of abuse (Bilson & Martin, 2016), practitioners who work closely with children have a complex task in maintaining their role as trusted protectors.

Teachers as trusted protectors

Teachers are at the forefront of ensuring the protection and development of children. Thus, preparing them for the task of protecting children from sexual abuse is an important focus of their teacher training programmes. However, not all teacher training courses ensure that qualifying teachers will have received comprehensive education about child protection (Goldman & Bradley, 2011).

In their role as trusted protectors, teachers face a multitude of challenges in relation to the pedagogies of how they conduct themselves for example, in relation to touching children and how they comprehend complex constructions of child protection (Singh & McWilliam, 2005). Unsurprisingly, Schols, de Rooter, & Öry's (2013) qualitative study of frontline workers' experiences conclude that teachers need supportive tools to assist them with their child protective function.

Providing educational methods which enable teachers to initiate the exploration of 'sensitive' topics that include bullying, child abuse and child sexual abuse is vital. Arguably, well researched dramatic productions such as 'Mr Shapeshifter', with its accompanying lesson plans contribute to the tools required not only for teachers, but also for children and their parents.

The shared experience of watching the play and the discussions that it promotes creates a safe space and understanding that gives permission to talk about the sensitive issue of child abuse. Importantly, these discussions extend beyond the school gates and disseminate into families and therefore the wider community.

Children have discussed the play with parents and staff. Discussing the matter of abuse, exploitation and trusted adults. All mentioned that they enjoyed it and found it very interesting.

**Bankside Primary School,
Leeds**

Importantly, learning is not simply about the messages conveyed, but the way in which they were conveyed. Feedback received from some teachers reflect the value they gave to 'Mr Shapeshifter' addressing child protection issues in a clear and light-hearted manner that illuminated the effects of child abuse, while simultaneously helping children to



think carefully about these complex issues.

The message was delivered in a sensitive manner and wasn't forced upon the children. It was kept light-hearted throughout the play but the message had a clear emphasis to ensure the children understood the severity of such a situation. The company gave children time to reflect on the issues raised which helped them think carefully. Overall, the play was extremely positive and made a difference to the children's understanding of such issues.

Castleford Park Junior Academy

Children as active agents

Children who were interviewed after watching 'Mr Shapeshifter' described the play as interesting. Some stated that they thought the play was about children 'being aware' and 'being aware online'. Children remarked that these were topics they felt they knew about already and had undertaken classes in school about it.

They thought it was interesting that the children understood 'Mr Shapeshifter' was not a 'good' person even though he pretended to be one. When asked if in everyday life we meet people who we think are good people but we find out they are not prompted a resounding 'yes' from one group of children. They noted

that this included adults as well as other children.

Some children described the powers that 'Mr Shapeshifter' had as 'weird' and one child remarked:

It feels like, if he was actually human, how could he have powers?

That comment prompted a discussion about what 'power' adults have in everyday life. One child's response suggests that some children feel empowered to make their own decisions.

It actually depends like, your parents decide like small things, for you, like your big decisions, it's your choice.

A discussion ensued about 'good' power and 'bad' power. At the start of the discussions the children brought a 'consent to participate' form signed by their parents and guardians. In addition, at the start of the focus group interview matters of consent were discussed and children were given permission to not participate or to choose how they might wish to participate. This included agreeing on the boundaries of confidentiality and anonymity.

It was apparent from this conversation that most were unaware of what their parents had signed for on their behalf. While this raises issues in relation to the importance of engaging children in giving their own informed consent, for the



purpose of the issue at hand it provided a platform for discussion on regarding communication between children and adults.

The children who participated in this evaluation gave mixed responses as to whether adults sufficiently listened to children. Interestingly, one child commented that adults never listen to children. However, his peers commented that this was because he misbehaved. Those feelings and observations reflected the themes that arose in 'Mr Shapeshifter' and provided an opportunity for the children to reflect on these issues as an extension of their own experiences.

Some children were critical of the character of Jess, whom they described as a bully. They were also critical of her posting pictures of herself on social media and wanting to go to Mr Shapeshifter's workshop.

Remember not to listen to anyone online and let them tell you to post pictures that you don't feel comfortable with.

The participating children commented that Jess should have done her research first, such as on a website, to find out more about Mr Shapeshifter. This cohort of children was aged 11 years (the same as Jess) and they admitted they would not undertake research themselves before such as event as they would be excited. The ability for primary aged children to engage with the complexity of these issues is notable. It demonstrates the value of critical exploration following the 'Mr Shapeshifter' play, in order to bridge any gaps children may have in

understanding the behaviour displayed by the characters from those the children experience within their everyday lives.

Don't trust people that you don't know and if they're trying to take you to a place, then refuse because you don't know what they're going to do to you.

In the 'Mr Shapeshifter' play, the character of Jack has complex needs and describes himself as 'mad' and 'bad', frequently Jack comments that he cannot remember events in his life. Some children remarked that Jack was 'confused' and was 'acting weird' when he kept running away from situations. Children admitted that they, like Jess, would not want to be friends with a child who behaved like that. The above reactions from the children reflect that the portrayal of the characters in the play easily resonates with the child audience.

It was kind of magical in a way because Mr Shapeshifter was changing into different people and he was controlling the teacher and tricking people into going to his workshop so he can do horrible things to them.

Some children were keen to talk about Mr Shapeshifter, and one child said he was a 'paedophile'. They shared that the work they did in school focussed a lot on issues such as child abuse. I note that the children who were interviewed would have been subject to the preparatory materials provided by GW Theatre for



teachers to use with them prior to watching the play. Some children thought that sexual abuse was what was meant by the term 'draining away of childhood' used in the play.

I think he was wrong, because he tricked Jack and Jess into thinking that he is Jess's dad but he isn't and then he changed into the teacher and to like controlling him.

One cohort of children, talked freely about incidents they were aware of where someone had been sexually abused. They made reference to a talk they had been given in school by a survivor of child sexual abuse. Interestingly, although the children thought that child sexual abuse happened 'a lot', they did not think they knew anyone that could be affected by it.

The characters of Jess and Jack in the play make frequent reference to 'something not feeling right'. In discussion children readily understood this to be what they described as a 'gut feeling'. They pointed to their stomachs and stated that this was an embodied sensation. Most children agreed that they had experience of this feeling and one said they recalled having the feeling at school the day before when listening to the survivor of abuse retell her story.

If someone is being suspicious don't believe them because they might be telling a whole lie.

Participating children felt that some children *'might be scared that people*

wouldn't listen to them and might think they are lying'. Positively, despite these challenges children felt they had people at home and at school to talk to. Some children were aware that some adults could control other adults and one child gave the example of geopolitical politics and other children suggested the example of their Head Teacher having control over the other teachers. Children concluded that it was 'scary' to think of there being 'bad people in the world but they all know 'good' people and felt that they would prevail over 'bad' people.

Some of the feedback from teachers affirmed the 'Mr Shapeshifter' play facilitated higher order thinking skills for the pupils who watched it. The play enables students to connect multiple complex concepts and allows them to infer meaning onto the behaviours of the characters. The play demonstrates how children and adults develop problem-solving strategies and encourage creative thinking and the need for resilience, if you are initially unsuccessful.

The pupils were engaged, asked higher order questions. The play complimented, reinforced and extended the pupils prior learning.

**Bankside Primary School,
Leeds**

In addition to the child protection issues that face children within their everyday lives and relationships, 'Mr Shapeshifter' also addresses the risks present in the interactions children have when using the internet. Earlier in 2018, the Children's



Commissioner for England report 'Life in Likes' warned that 'children are unprepared for social media cliff edge as they commence secondary school. Positively, 'Mr Shapeshifter' was able to assist in the learning of children in Year 5 and 6 about the way they can use the internet more safely.

Very informative and a great way for children to understand such a serious topic. The children can now explain a lot more about these issues and I feel they have gained valuable knowledge about being safe online and what to do if ever a situation arose that they didn't feel comfortable with.

**Castleford Park Junior
Academy,
West Yorkshire**

The 'Mr Shapeshifter' play has a central focus on children having trust in the way the actions of others make them feel. This focus on their emotions and the physical and psychological feelings of being scared and confused contribute to the CCE's assertion that there needs to be attention given to helping children more prepared for a healthy digital life.

The children have responded well to the performance. It was a brilliant catalyst for starting discussions about healthy and unhealthy relationships and the importance of safety online.

**Parklands Primary School,
Leeds**

Conclusion

The Children's Commissioner for England reminds us that we live in a world in which an estimated 1.6million children are subject to vulnerability, in part, because public services fail to recognise and support them. Many of these children will be attending a primary school setting which leaves teachers at the forefront of providing safeguarding services to children with complex needs. Arguably, schools are aided by the inclusion of specialist knowledge provided by organisations such as the GW Theatre Company who produce a research-based drama to address pertinent issues identified by the CCE Vulnerability report (2018).

Children are not responsible for the abuse they experience or for bringing that abuse to an end. However, empowering children to know that abuse is wrong and that adults have a responsibility to prevent it is an important message. To this end, the 'Mr Shapeshifter' play serves to empower children in their capacity to understand when the behaviour of a person is wrong. It recognises the sometimes frailty of adults but also the power they have to stop other adults from hurting children. The play also increased awareness of the dangers of online activity when abusive adults might pretend to be someone else with an intent to hurt them. However, beyond messages of abuse, 'Mr Shapeshifter' encouraged children to be reflective of the needs of other children and to trust their own instincts when judging the actions of other people.

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APPENDIX ONE

Comments from children's GW Theatre post-performance pupil survey forms

Did the play help you to understand what is meant by abuse and exploitation in a real life or online friendship/relationship?

94% of the children answered YES

Did the play help you to understand how to be safer online and on your phone from someone who might want to upset, abuse or exploit you?

95% answered YES

Did the play help you to feel strong enough to tell someone if you are ever affected by an abusive relationship or friendship?

80% answered YES

What did you enjoy about the play?

- I liked that they never gave up and fought against evil
- I enjoyed the bit where the shapeshifter changes into different people because it's obviously not real but it is real to people's behaviour. Their behaviour can change
- It was a good way to explain, in a metaphor, the dangers of the internet
- When things were finally going the right way
- It was funny but giving a serious message
- That it told us to stay safe – but in a fun and exciting way
- It taught us how to be safe
- When the shapeshifter was defeated
- How Jess and Jack became friends to beat the shapeshifter together
- They had 'that feeling' when they felt they couldn't trust someone
- How the play involved us in telling the story
- The message – if it doesn't feel right then it isn't!

What did the play make you think about?

- About staying safe online
- How someone might try to trick me into doing something
- Not to send rude or inappropriate pictures
- Do not bully!
- Always trust your instincts
- Don't give personal information away
- Don't be scared of telling people what has happened
- People can say something when they are not
- Even if someone is annoying or you don't like them – if they are trying to tell you something listen to them because they could be telling the truth
- To tell someone if something is wrong
- If you see someone being bullied or hurt help them
- It made me feel safer
- Don't be forced to do things
- That I should only speak to people I personally know online
- You don't know who you are talking to online
- There are some people who can't be trusted
- Think before you post things online



Tell us some things you could do to keep yourself safe when using your phone or online

- Only chat to people you know
- Don't send people your personal information
- Block people you do not know
- Always have your social media settings on private
- Could ask mum to sit with you while you are on your phone
- Don't text random people
- Never show a private picture of yourself
- Don't lie about yourself or your age
- Don't add random people
- Do not agree to meet anyone you do not know
- Go on settings and make sure only people you know can speak to you
- Tell your parents what you are playing before you play
- Don't spread rumours about other children
- Show abusive messages to parents and teachers
- Report bad behaviour
- Keep your private stuff away from online

What should you do if you don't trust the behaviour of someone and what they are doing is making you feel strange or wrong?

- Tell a trusted adult
- Speak out – don't keep your feelings inside
- Tell the police
- TELL SOMEONE!
- You should speak to someone about any strange behaviour
- Tell your parents
- Call CHILDLINE because they will always listen
- Contact NSPCC
- Ring children's services

If you speak to an adult and they do not respond in the way you want them to or you do not fully believe they are trying to help you what should you do then?

- Go to another adult – keep searching for someone you can trust
- Go straight to the police
- Get away from them as soon as you can
- You should keep asking for help until someone trusts you and you can trust them
- NEVER give up!
- Find someone who will understand
- Call your mum, dad, police, sister, brother and cousins
- Tell the adult to listen to you more carefully