# Understanding online shaming - a guide for parents

You've probably heard of public shaming. It's a centuries-old punishment, for anything from a crime to someone doing something others feel is morally wrong.

A few 100 years ago, it might have involved locking somebody in the village stocks for the day. The guilty person would be subject to the locals' scorn (and the occasional piece of well-aimed rotten fruit) and would be publicly shamed for their misdemeanour.

It's of course unthinkable that this sort of public shaming could happen in this day and age. But, a modern, digital version of shaming has become increasingly popular.

## What is online shaming?

Online shaming is when somebody is targeted and attacked by other online users, usually on social media platforms. This could be because of something they've said, or perhaps an image they've posted. Online shaming is a form of online bullying which takes place on a large scale, often by a crowd of other online users, rather than someone you know.

The attackers vilify, insult, and pour scorn on the person because of what they've done. There have been several well known cases of online shaming in the last few years, where people worldwide have joined in to shame the victim – in some cases making it one of top trending topics on Twitter.

A case of shaming doesn't always have to be a viral, trending topic on Twitter either. Shaming online can happen on a smaller scale. A large group of young people can gang up on someone online, targeting them for something they've said, or done. Online shaming can be easy to get caught up in, and can have serious consequences offline.

## When did online shaming start happening?

Because of the relative anonymity of the online space, shaming others has been happening online for a long time. Before social media, it may have been a group of people attacking someone on a forum for something they said. Social media has allowed more people to find out about something stupid or offensive somebody has posted, and for it to even become 'viral' across the world.

## Why do people do it?

Online, individuals can join with many others. Being part of a large group, along with the relative anonymity of the online world, can help foster a mob mentality which means people

can end up saying things that they never normally would in real life. The internet also provides a level of distance: when you can't see the person you're attacking, and see before your eyes the effect your words are having on someone, it's easier to lose your sense of compassion.

## What are the consequences?

When one woman wrote a tweet that mocked how living in America puts people in a bubble when it comes to what's going on in the Third World, the (admittedly misjudged and not very funny) joke was taken the wrong way. The woman sent the tweet just before boarding a flight to Africa. With no online access during the 11-hour flight, she was completely unaware that her comment had been retweeted tens of thousands of times, without the chance to defend herself or take it down, with people condemning her as racist (among other insults) on Twitter.

News spread of when her plane was landing, and people living in the area even went to the airport to post photos of her arrival.

She walked off the plane into a media storm that had spread beyond the confines of Twitter. Eleven days after the tweet, she had been Googled 1,220,000 times and fired from her job. She described the experience as 'incredibly traumatic', still cannot interact on social media, and felt that she couldn't date people any more.[1]

There have been other cases of online shaming. Most of the time, the user who is publicly shamed on social media simply doesn't deserve the magnitude of the attack they receive, and the consequences of it.

It could be a comment that perhaps wasn't fully thought through by the poster, a sarcastic message that was taken the wrong way or out of context. And if enough people see it, and it's sufficiently spread around, it can result in a mob of people belittling and condemning the user.

At best, this can seriously undermine a person's self-esteem. At worst, someone can lose their job, jeopardise their reputation and suffer serious mental health problems such as depression.[2]

For a young person, who may be less resilient than an adult, this could have a profound effect on their mental health and on their social lives. For children, the shaming doesn't have to go global – it's enough that they have been targeted by their fellow pupils at school for it to have a negative effect on them.

## Tips for parents

Luckily, a case of somebody being shamed online, and it going viral, is unusual. But parents can help their child so they can avoid becoming caught up in something similar.

- Talk to your child about online shaming on social media. If they have already heard about it, ask them what they know about it and what their opinion of it is.
- Remind them to avoid posting something that could be taken the wrong way – if a joke they're about to make could be taken the wrong way, it's probably best not to post it publicly.
- Emphasise to them that any mean comment they make on social media about something someone else has posted is going to affect the person on the receiving end.
- Remind them that they should only ever say something online that they'd be happy to say offline, and face-to-face. Being online can sometimes make us think we have the freedom to say what we like, with the internet acting as a sort of mask. Emphasise to them that what they do or say online can have real-life consequences, too. For example, they could be called into the school for disciplinary action.
- Things that are said or done online can often be taken out of context. Talk to your children about being digitally savvy, and to check the facts before they jump in with their opinion.
- Highlight to them how easy it is to get caught up in a group. It feels good to be a part of something, but, it's often helpful to take a step back and think logically about what they're about to do or say first. The old mantra, 'if they told you to jump off a cliff, would you?' rings true online just as much as it does offline.
- Talk to your child about their [digital footprint](#) and remind them that any unkind comment they post online is always going to be out there. Once they've posted it, it's out of their control.