

## Staying Safe on Dating Websites

### Background

With people everywhere now leading such busy lives, finding life partners is increasingly difficult. Dating websites have therefore become increasingly popular. So much so that the industry is currently worth a cool £170m a year with hundreds of sites operating in the UK!

In September 2013, new campaigning charity Paladin claimed that online dating agencies were 'not doing enough to protect women from being targeted by stalkers and men convicted of domestic violence'.

This is clearly an important safeguarding issue.

What are the possible dangers that people may encounter whilst using dating websites?

How common are they?

What are the online dating industry doing about them?

Incidents of online stalking are incredibly rare, 1 or 2 a year. This issue can be sensationalised and exaggerated by the press but if somebody is being stalked, they find it very distressing.

A further difficulty is that, although the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 lists the sorts of behaviour that may be displayed in a stalking offence, there is currently no legal definition of stalking in the UK. The list includes following someone or monitoring someone's internet usage, email or other form of electronic communication.

### New Legislation

Women with children who are thinking about online dating should remember they can now take advantage of '**Sarah's Law**' (also known as the government's Child Sex Offenders Disclosure Scheme) (For more information, go to [http://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/police\\_disclosure\\_scheme.htm](http://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/police_disclosure_scheme.htm)). Rolled out across the UK a couple of years ago, it allows anyone to ask the police to check whether the person they are in a relationship with could represent a risk to children. If an individual does have convictions for sexual offences against children or poses a risk of causing harm, the police can choose to disclose this information to the parent.

In addition, four police forces including Greater Manchester, have piloted the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS) or **Clare's Law**, whereby people can make similar enquiries about someone they are in a relationship with (For more information, go to the [GOV.UK website](#) and the [Clare's Law leaflet](#))

These initiatives are important and helpful because they enable women to make more informed choices about who they choose to spend their lives with.

## **Simple Guidance to Staying Safe while Dating Online**

- Check the details of the person you are meeting. If you can, look at their Facebook or Linked-In profiles beforehand
- Meet in public somewhere you cannot be followed home from
- Above all, tell a friend who you are with and where you are, and arrange a time by which you will call them to let you know you are ok
- Never give out your e-mail details or other contact details before you feel confident in the person. Some people ask for personal contact details immediately – NEVER feel you have to do this. Don't put personal things on your profile that can make it easy for them to find out who you are and how they might find you
- Don't undermine your privacy by putting your entire life on Facebook or Linked-In. Some people go into very great detail about themselves, where they live and who their children are, often including pictures. Always check your privacy settings to see what's in the public domain. Many people don't realise that their conversations are open to the public. To anyone starting internet dating, take a long hard look at your Facebook page and delete anything inappropriate. And don't necessarily believe all you see on a prospective partner's pages either – make sure you do as much homework as possible as you can on them too. People often spice up their FB profiles.

## **Scammers/Fraudsters**

There will occasionally be people who say they are looking for a soulmate but really only trying to extract money out of their emotionally vulnerable victims. Many of these people live outside the UK and have developed some very sophisticated techniques for doing so. They create attractive profiles, often partially copied from other people. They often say that they are widowed and have young children with chronic illnesses. The stories, of course, change all the time. They know how to make people feel special and needed. But despite a stream of promises, the first date never quite materialises. And then the repeated requests for cash begin.

So sometimes, people who are wise to tricksters are lured in when emotionally vulnerable. They may even part with money – sometimes large sums of it.

Never give money to someone you have met online. If you know someone who has been scammed, encourage them to not blame themselves but to learn from their mistake and to move on.

Double dip: once someone has fallen subject to a romance scam, they are targeted repeatedly and sometimes fall victim again. We all get scammed at some stage in our lives but romance scams are especially cruel.

## **Latest Developments**

2013 saw the creation of the Online Dating Association (ODA) which includes as members some of the largest dating sites in the business. They are preparing a new code of practice and kite-marking system for its members, so its members will become fully accountable to an overseeing body.

Some sites don't take safety standards seriously and see dating as a way to make money and can be very exploitative. The number of adult sites which employ questionable tactics has increased.

Think carefully about which sites to join, who runs them, and check with your friends. Read online reviews before entrusting online dating sites with personal data. But beware of fake positive or malicious reviews.

For more tips and guidance, go to [e-sad](#).

Source: CCPAS (The Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service)