

What Parents & Educators Need to Know about EMOJIS

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Emojis are more than playful expressions — they form a fast-evolving digital language that many adults struggle to decode. For young people, this 'secret code' is central to how they communicate identity, humour and emotions. With over 8 billion emojis sent daily on Facebook Messenger alone, understanding these symbols is key to engaging meaningfully with digital youth.

GENERATIONAL MISCOMMUNICATION

An emoji like 🍌 (thumbs up-emoji) might seem friendly to adults, but teens often interpret it as sarcastic or passive-aggressive. These differing interpretations can create confusion or unintended tension in cross-generational conversations.

SHIELDING BULLYING OR PEER PRESSURE

When embedded in emojis, mean-spirited jokes or exclusionary language can fly under the radar. Terms like 'mud' or 'diddy' may seem harmless, but they can be used to undermine peers in subtle ways.

RAPIDLY SHIFTING MEANINGS

Emoji meanings can change overnight. A person standing emoji (🧑) once signified admiration, but might now be interpreted as something entirely different. This ever-changing lexicon can leave adults in the dark and young people vulnerable to misunderstanding or misuse.

MASKING DISTRESS OR HARM

Some emojis are used to discreetly signal troubling behaviours. For instance, 🍷 (drinking glass emoji) or 🍑 (peach emoji) might suggest drug use, while 🍷 (drinking glass emoji) could hint at emotional struggles. Such usage can obscure serious issues, making them harder for trusted adults to detect.

NORMALISING RISKY BEHAVIOURS

Emojis can make harmful actions seem light-hearted or appropriate. Strings like 🍷🍷🍷 (fire + 'wocky' face + pill emoji) may appear humorous but can normalise partying, intoxication or dangerous challenges, which might overshadow vital red flags.

Advice for Parents & Educators

LEARN THE LINGO

Stay updated with emoji trends and definitions using resources like emojipedia.org or Urban Dictionary. Knowing current meanings builds confidence when engaging with young people and helps spot potential concerns early.

ASK, DON'T ASSUME

Approach unfamiliar emojis with curiosity rather than suspicion. A light-hearted "what does 🍷 (juice box emoji) mean these days?" can open conversation and show that you respect their knowledge.

CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR DISCUSSION

Encourage casual chats about emojis, online slang, memes, or social media trends. Showing interest without judgement reassures young people that they can talk about their digital world openly and safely.

PRIORITISE TRUST OVER SURVEILLANCE

While parental controls and monitoring tools can be useful, emotional safety matters most. Be someone children and young people feel they can come to — not just someone who's watching them.

EMOJI CHEAT SHEET -

The following slang terms and emojis are some common examples - please be aware this isn't an exhaustive list.

COMMON EMOJIS:

🍷 (Clean face) Excitement or cheering amount	🍷 (Winking face) Over-the-topness or 'tonguing'
🍷 (Cold face) Cook, cry, or ruthless	🍷 (Frying) Watching drama unfold
🍷 (Hot face) Intense attraction or excitement	🍷 (Cow) Greatest of all time (G.O.A.T.)
🍷 (Mud) Stone-faced, unbothered	🍷 (Diddy) Confidence, badassness, or badassness
🍷 (Cow) Staying on in doing great	🍷 (Triangular flag) Red flag, a warning sign about someone's behaviour

POTENTIALLY CONCERNING EMOJIS

🍷 (Eye of corn) Slang for pornography (evokes censorship negatively)	🍷 (Winked face) Often used to convey emotional struggle or sadness
🍷 (Gross face, unwell, stone dead)	🍷 (Smile) Can represent being loyal or being 'face-locked'
🍷 (Frying, lying face) Related to cocaine use	🍷 (Wine glass) Sometimes used to reference violence or self-harm
🍷 (Fruiting leaves, fruits, maple leaf) Can symbolise cannibalism	🍷 (Winking) Used to emphasise drama, threats or emotional turmoil
🍷 (Pill) May reference drug use or prescription misuse	🍷 (Hoodie) Is an abbreviation of 'hoodies'

Meet Our Expert

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