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People of all ages use emojis in their digital communications. In addition to adding humour or emphasis to messages, for some communities and peer groups, these symbols can form a language of their own. This is particularly true of young people and teenagers, who sometimes use emojis as a code to disguise their true intentions from adults.

While hidden meanings behind emojis used by young people can be harmless, some may indicate risks including extremism, drugs, sexual interactions and bullying. This was recently brought to life on the Netflix limited series, [Adolescence](#), which depicted the devastating consequences of harmful online interactions, and the warning signs (in the form of emojis) that are easily missed by adults.

To help schools and parents decode potentially harmful messages, we've compiled a list of emojis commonly used in dangerous contexts. This includes specific emojis used on the show, and others highlighted by the work of Olivia Brown, Associate Professor in Digital Futures at the University of Bath.

Emoji(s)	Potential Meaning
	The red pill emoji is linked to incel, or “involuntarily celibate”, culture, where misogynistic and extremist views are prevalent. The meaning originates from The Matrix films, but has been adopted by the manosphere to represent those who see the “real truth” in the world.
	The blue pill emoji is used in incel culture to represent the opposite of the red pill – those who are blind to the real truth and adhere to more mainstream views about gender dynamics.
	The 100 emoji is used in relation to incel culture. It represents the idea promoted by those in the manosphere that 80% of women are attracted to 20% of men. Incels believe that the most dominant of men (‘Chad’s’) are ‘hoarding’ the majority of women, so they are withholding love and attention from the ‘ordinary’ men. This can be used as an insult to indicate that a man will always be celibate.
	The dynamite emoji is used in incel culture to represent the exploding red pill, in other words, breaking out of societal norms and myths. According to Gov.uk, incels ‘forge a sense of identity around their perceived inability to form

	sexual or romantic relationships'. They blame women for this perceived inability.
	The kidney beans emoji is tied to incel culture. It is thought to represent coffee beans, which link back to a series of memes mocking women.
	The plug emoji can be used to mean drug dealer, also known as a person's "plug".
	The snowflake, nose and petrol pump emojis are all used to represent the drug cocaine.
	The horse emojis can be used to represent the drug ketamine.
	Skull, alien and devil emojis may represent the drug ecstasy.
	Also Skull – While often just slang for "that's funny" or "I'm dead (from laughing)," in certain groups, it can signal darker themes like nihilism or self-harm.
	The balloon emoji may be used to represent the drug nitrous oxide.
	Camera emojis, eyes or noodles can represent a request for nude/explicit images or videos.
	These emojis can all be used to represent body parts in a sexual context: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Testicles, penis</li> <li>- Bum</li> <li>- Vagina</li> </ul>
	The sweat emoji may also be used in a sexual context, including ejaculation.
	The pointing and ok fingers or screwdriver emoji all refer to intercourse
	The tongue or brain emojis refer to oral sex
	The corn emoji refers to pornography

	The face with no mouth emoji can convey the message "Do not tell anybody". It may be used in a bullying context or when sharing inappropriate, illegal or sensitive information.
	The frog emoji can mean "You're ugly". It is used in bullying or harassment contexts. Associated with alt-right and extremist meme culture, often linked to Pepe the Frog, which has been co-opted by some toxic online groups.
	Eagle is a symbol of extreme nationalism, sometimes used in far-right online spaces.
	Scissors refer to cutting themselves
	Fire refers to 'hot' in a sexual way OR burning themselves
	Plate and X mean 'not eating'
	Black hole are used to express depression, hopelessness, or being sucked into negative online spaces.
	Tornado represents chaos or feeling overwhelmed, sometimes used to indicate mental distress.
	Heart emojis can mean different things depending on the colour used. The red heart usually means love.
	The purple heart can be used to convey attraction or sexual desire. 'Horny'
	The yellow heart may mean "I'm interested, are you interested?"
	The pink heart can mean "I'm interested but not in sex."
	An orange heart is more likely to be platonic, and means "You're going to be fine."

When monitoring digital interactions for these emojis, it's important to remember that context matters. Their use does not automatically indicate a harmful conversation – the specific circumstances in which a symbol is used will reveal whether it's something that should spark concern. Understanding the hidden meanings behind emojis can be most helpful when they are considered alongside other markers of risk.

Of course, the language used by teenagers is constantly evolving. The meanings of emojis can change from one month to the next, so it's useful to try to stay abreast of the latest slang, as it may offer signs of safeguarding risks.

Regular, judgement-free discussions with young people on their understanding and experience of online interactions encourages openness and can establish a strong foundation for digital safety lessons.

So what should parents do?

1. Get Curious, Not Combative – Ask open-ended questions: "I saw something about emojis meaning different things. Have you heard of this?" Keep the conversation light.
2. Create a Judgment-Free Zone – If your child feels like they'll be punished for opening up, they won't. Make it clear you're there to listen, not just lecture.
3. Decode Together – Ask them to explain their digital world. What do different symbols mean? Who are the influencers they follow? Don't assume—ask.
4. Teach Critical Thinking – Help them question online content. "Why do you think some groups push this idea? Who benefits?" Arm them with questions, not just rules.
5. Monitor Without Spying – Open conversations work better than secret surveillance. Make checking in on their online spaces a normal part of parenting, not a crisis move.
6. Be Real About Manipulation – Explain how toxic online groups groom young people by making them feel special, included, or like they have 'insider knowledge.'
7. Build Their Offline Confidence – The more they feel valued and confident in the real world, the less they'll seek validation in dangerous online spaces.