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Decoding EMOJIS,

What They Really Mean and why we need to be aware



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When children send messages filled with emojis, it can feel harmless, just a bit of fun and colour in the digital world. But behind the smiling faces, flames, and aubergines lies a fast-evolving language that adults can easily miss. Emojis are no longer just playful icons, they've become powerful tools for expressing emotion, forming identity, and sometimes reinforcing harmful ideas.

As childminders and parents, we don't need to panic, but we do need to pay attention. Understanding how emojis are used by children, especially boys, can help us spot early signs of toxic behaviours and gently guide young people towards more respectful, empathetic online communication.

Emojis: A digital language of emotion

Children today grow up fluent in a visual language we didn't learn at school. Emojis are now an essential part of how they communicate. From WhatsApp and Snapchat to group chats on gaming platforms like Roblox or Discord, emojis can replace words, soften messages, or carry sarcasm and subtext.

While a 😊 might mean a genuine "thank you," it can also be used passively-aggressively in an argument. A thumbs-up 👍 can be supportive or dismissive, depending on the context. In group chats, emojis often take on their own evolving meaning among peer groups, acting as inside jokes, coded messages, or even social hierarchies.

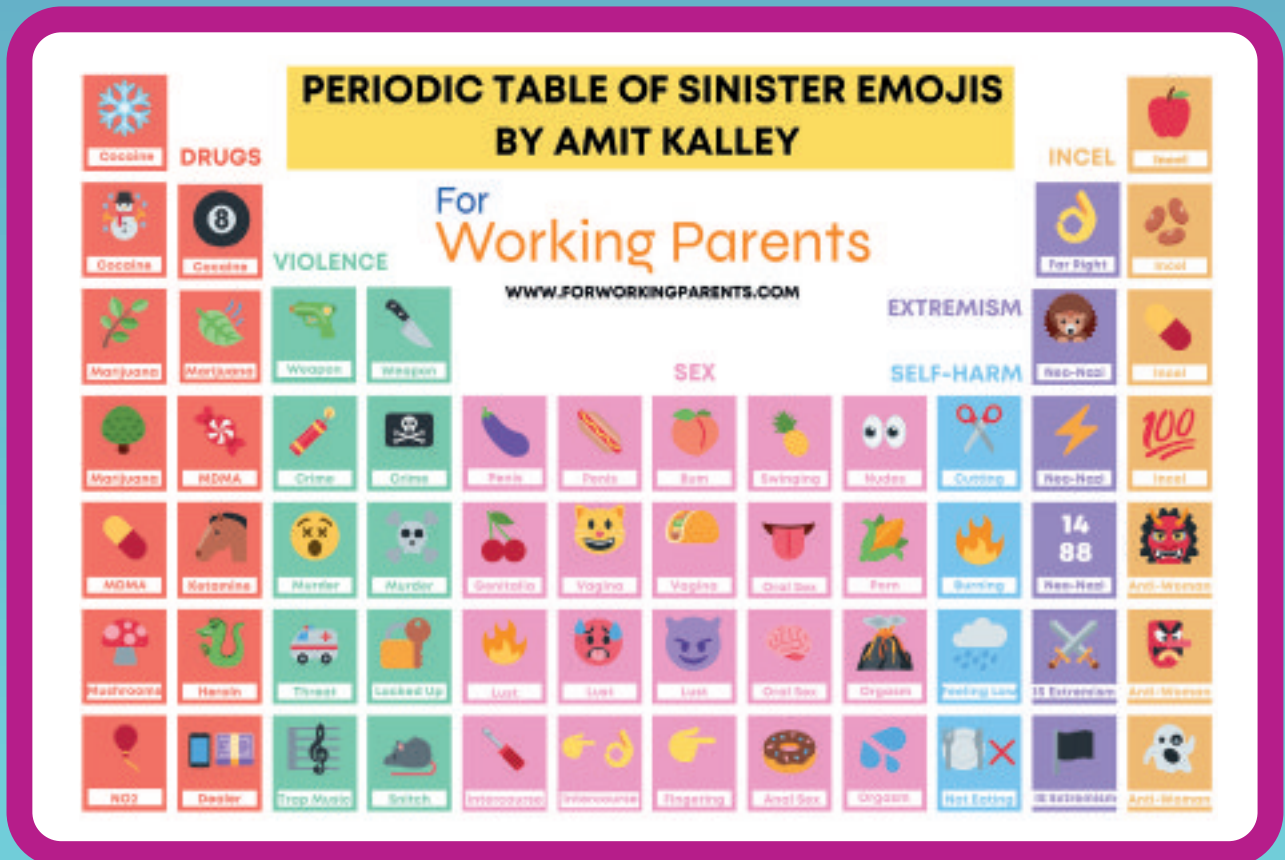
For younger children especially, emojis are a gateway to emotional expression. A child who struggles to say "I feel left out" may instead send a crying emoji 😭 or the side-eye 🙄. But this same flexibility also makes emojis vulnerable to misuse.

The hidden meanings behind the icons

Here's where things get trickier. Some emojis have developed double meanings, often unknown to the adults supervising children's online activity.



(Skull): Not about death. In Gen Z slang, this emoji usually means "I'm dead (from laughing)." But it can also be used to mock someone in a group chat after they've made a mistake.



(Eye-roll): Commonly used to belittle, suggest someone is being annoying or irrelevant.

(Smirk): Often used flirtatiously or sarcastically, sometimes to hint at inappropriate content or conversations.

These food-related emojis are often used to represent body parts or sexual innuendo, even among preteens copying older peers.

(Clown): Used to imply someone is acting foolish or should be embarrassed.

(Red flag): Originally used to indicate warning signs in relationships, but now often shared to mock or shame someone's behaviour.

None of these are automatically harmful, but their use in certain contexts can indicate patterns of teasing, exclusion,

or worse. When I created my periodic table of emojis, it was context that was missed by many people.

When emojis reflect early toxic masculinity

One emerging concern is how some boys, even in primary school, begin using emojis to assert dominance or hide emotional vulnerability.

The (muscle) emoji, for example, is often used to reinforce stereotypically “manly” traits; strength, toughness, “powering through” rather than expressing discomfort. Paired with emojis like (fire) or (smiling devil), it can signal bravado, aggression, or mockery.

The (smirk) emoji is another example, commonly used in contexts where a boy wants to seem unfazed or “cool,” often while putting someone else down.

FIVE ACTIONABLE STEPS:

Think about how you and other adults use media at home, because your media use is setting an example for children.

1 Ask, don't accuse

Instead of saying, "Why did you use that emoji?" try: "I noticed you sent that clown emoji, what does that mean to your group?" Children are more likely to share when they don't feel interrogated. Show curiosity, not judgement.

2 Explore together

If you're unsure about an emoji or trend, look it up together. Sites like Emojipedia or Internet Matters offer helpful interpretations, and this joint research helps children learn digital literacy alongside you.

3 Talk about feelings, not just rules

Rather than banning emojis or policing chats, discuss how they make others feel. For example: "How do you think someone feels when a group all sends the eye-roll emoji after they speak?"

4 Model respectful online behaviour

Children mirror what they see. If we model kindness in our messages, use emojis to encourage and empathise, and avoid sarcasm in group chats, they're more likely to follow suit.



5 Review chat dynamics regularly

Encourage children to show you their group chats now and again, not to "snoop," but to build trust. Ask questions like: "Does everyone get to speak?" "Are there ever jokes that go too far?". This helps children reflect on group norms and recognise when things feel unfair or mean-spirited.

Over time, these digital habits can lay the groundwork for toxic masculinity: a culture where boys are encouraged to suppress emotion, mock others, and reject empathy. If left unchecked, such behaviour can escalate. While it may start with a teasing emoji in Year 5, it can evolve into exclusionary behaviour, sexist jokes, or dismissiveness in teen relationships.

Practical guidance for childminders and parents

So, how can adults respond? First, we need to open the conversation, not just about emojis, but about the whole landscape of digital communication.

Building digital awareness from a young age

Our ultimate goal isn't to decode every emoji, it's to raise digitally aware children who understand that what they send online has real impact. Even a single emoji can make someone feel supported or singled out.

Childminders can play a big role here. Daily conversations during pick-up time, digital play sessions, or group activities that promote empathy and kindness can all reinforce this message. Here are some simple strategies:

- Digital Story Time: Read books or watch short videos about online kindness and discuss how emojis might be used in those situations.

- **Emoji Emotion Boards:** Use emoji flashcards to help younger children name feelings and build emotional vocabulary.
- **Role-Play Online Chats:** Act out group chat scenarios using emoji cards; ask, “How would you feel if your name was left out?” or “What emoji would you use if someone was sad?”

Staying ahead of the trends

The world of digital communication changes fast. New emojis, acronyms, and slang crop up constantly, and children often pick them up before we do. Parents and carers can stay informed by following trusted sources such as Childnet, Internet Matters, and For Working Parents, which provide regular updates on online trends. Engaging with other adults - including childminders, school staff, and fellow parents - can offer valuable insights, as if one person notices something concerning, others likely have too.

Maintaining an open dialogue with children is crucial; when children sense their parents’ interest without panic, they are more inclined to share their

experiences. Although emojis might seem like a small digital detail, they play a significant role in how children express themselves, build relationships, and navigate social interactions. By paying attention and asking thoughtful questions, adults can guide children to use emojis in ways that foster connection and empathy rather than exclusion or belittlement.

In a world that often pushes boys to be “tough” and silent, even a small shift in emoji use can be a step toward raising kinder, more emotionally intelligent young people. **CP**

Resources

- **Decoding the Online World for Parents, Schools & Organisations:**
forworkingparents.com
- **Helping make the internet a great and safe place for children and young people:**
www.childnet.com
- **Because children deserve a safe digital world:**
www.internetmatters.org

