SAFEGUARDING

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA – UPDATE AND SUPPORT

We know that parenting a teenager or young adult in the modern world can be quite a daunting challenge. The world is fast moving and can be hard to keep up with; we hope this information is useful.

This information is not meant to scare you, although I am sure some of this will worry all parents. I also can assure you that none of this is exaggerated, we see it first hand with our children frequently. Our intention is never to tell you how to parent, but to share information and advice that may be of help.

The school is always available to support you in supporting your child to stay safe, by doing so children can and will be kept safe.

Social Media/ Online Safety

The schools view is, which you are welcome to discard, that misuse of social media poses one of the biggest threats to the wellbeing of young people that we have ever experienced. Despite the common view, it is not a necessity of modern life, no one HAS to use social media and there is a good chance that it has moved from being a convenience or social opportunity to being a dangerous distraction from the real world or worse, an addiction.

Below are some of the issues that we are currently experiencing on a regular basis due to the use/ misuse of social media:

- **Bullying** – 95+ % of bullying involving young people now takes place online, outside of school. This often takes place on messaging apps or social media platforms such as snapchat. It is often more extreme than traditional "playground" bullying.
- **Exposure** to pornography and inappropriate images. This is more commonly taking place on Tik Tok with students being exposed to sexual, violent images and videos in a constant stream. This includes exposure to violent behaviours, criminal culture, the baiting or undermining of authority figures such as the police, teachers and health care professionals as well as hateful language towards women and minority groups.
- **Lack of sleep**– are often part of large chat groups (sometimes with over 2-300 members) and these groups are known to be highly active through the night with notifications preventing or disrupting sleep.
- **Influence of culture and values** – the values are increasingly being defined and led by online "influencers" and content providers with questionable morals, views or motives.
- **Exposure to extreme views** – including the influence of the terror groups, hate groups, Incel groups most often set up by off-shore "Trolls" of "bot" accounts.
- **Misinformation** – again, often from "Trolls" or "bot" accounts (short for robot) designed to spread misinformation to destabilise society and cause confusion. Most recently this included Anti-vax propaganda.
- **Money scams and money laundering** – students are now frequently being targeted by organised criminals online with tempting promises of financial rewards to undertake transfers of money or goods. Most if not all drug dealing now takes place online. This can include the use of crypto currencies.

- **Grooming of children** – We all too frequently investigate the grooming of young children to share nude or inappropriate images online this includes requests accounts posing as other young people, model scouts often with offers of financial rewards, threats or bribery. This often takes place in the messages sections of social media apps such as Instagram.
- **Unrealistic goals, body image and unhealthy obsessions –** This relates to the increasing exposure to "lifestyles" or "looks" on trending/ viral social media – placing a huge amount of pressure on young people to look or aspire to unachievable lifestyles in an unhealthy way that destroys self-confidence and distorts values.

The key issue is that much of this online activity is unmoderated. If a child is left to use social media without control or monitoring then they are exposed to all of these risks and potential dangers. As innocent as social media might seem, we have seen a huge increase in the issues it causes in our children, this can include self-harm, anxiety, low self-esteem, online abuse and risk taking behaviours. As a school we have also seen a decrease in real world social skills that include being polite and kind, respecting authority figures, resilience alongside an inflated sense of either entitlement or lack of confidence/ self-belief.

It is also the case that the "influence" or the "influencers" of social media have increasingly more influence than both parents and teachers. Social media, in many cases still remains the wild west of entertainment and communication.

As a school we are having to manage the disturbance and disruption that social media causes to young people lives and this in turn thins our resources that could better use elsewhere. It is also increasingly apparent that adults are at no less at risk when it comes to social media and can be subject to the same influences but as adults are more able to navigate these.

In order to keep your child safe I can recommend the following strategies:

- Think carefully about whether your child should have access to social media at all. Ask yourself as a family – is it healthy, is it safe, is it useful, does it make my child happy in the long term? If the answer is no, then discuss this and take steps to strictly limit or remove it.
- Remember that as parents you are both responsible and in charge. Children should be listened to, but not call the shots. Your decision, in the best interests of your child are important. There is no law that says children (or anyone) must have social media access it is a choice and one that has consequences that may have to be lived with.
- Make sure that you know what your child is doing online at all times, this includes being able to have open and honest conversations about their online activity and knowing what they are saying and who they are talking to. Nothing should be hidden or unknown.
- Do not simply prohibit use – this leads to children finding other ways to access these banned apps or items which you will not know about and carry high risk. Always encourage clear conversations where you can be open and honest whilst ensuring boundaries.
- Find alternatives to social media such as more opportunities to engage in sport, music, entertainment as a family or with friends.
- Explain to your children the consequences and dangers of social media and how to manage them. Make them aware that if you a member of large groups on social media there is a high chance at some point you will be bullied and will have to deal with it, be resilient and cope with this. It is a sad and unfortunate part of most online communities.
- Explain how they should tell you if they are worried or scared and take a "no blame" approach. This will ensure they always let you know if they are in trouble. If they are scared

of blame or sanctions they may not be honest when the need to be and this can be dangerous in itself.

- Set a good example – be aware that students will copy parental behaviours including online.
- Have clear boundaries. If there is something you don't want your child to be exposed to – make this clear, be firm with these expectations and then monitor this. Children will be persistent and upset when you limit their online access, this is what children do, they push boundaries. Just remember, it is in their best interests and in the interests of their physical and mental safety.
- Do not accept the argument that "everyone does it" its "just what young people do these days, these are never good reason to surrender the safety of a child. To sounds like an old school teacher… "If your friend jumped off a cliff, would you"?
- Reward and praise children for making the right choices.
- Restrict access to certain apps, or restrict the times which children can access social media/ messaging apps. This allows some building of trust whilst preventing addiction and unmoderated access.
- Seek help from the school or other professionals if you need to know more about social media and these dangers. Ignorance is no longer an excuse.
- Remember that we are talking about children – they do not have the knowledge of the world that we do and are far less likely to be able to process what they see in the same way as an adult. Ensure that on this basis that extreme content is blocked, restricted and moderated by clear parental controls that are a basic condition of use.
- Talk openly as a family, include your children in this, hear their views, listen to them and provide alternatives.

Useful information and support:

E Safety Policy

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Parental Controls Guidance

Keeping children safe online

How to recognise and deal with Online Abuse

Cyberbullying Checklist

Online Grooming

Understanding Sexting

Online Safety for Teenagers

Pornography

Notes:

"Trolls" harass or post online with the intention of stirring up a reaction from others. You will often see them in comments online when a deliberately offensive or divisive comment is made on a post to which others then react often angrily. These are often fake accounts.

"Bots" are automated account, often using Artificial intelligence that appear to be real people and again post misinformation or deliberately antagonising posts to cause upset, generate followers or sell a product.