



5 October 2017

Dear Parent / Carer

Re: Social Media Safety

We are only a few weeks into our new academic year and already we have had to deal with significant numbers of Social Media incidents which have been brought into school. We have made a significant number of referrals to counselling and well-being support, as students are exhausted from being unable to switch off at night. We ask for your assistance with this challenge.

We recognise some social media sites and apps provide sources of information and engaging educational tools, however too often this is not the case. Many sites are providing ways for students to spread and share inappropriate pictures and comments. Across the country, schools have seen an increase in negative student behaviour as a result of messages written using electronic technology, posted to popular social networking sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. The posting of any offensive or threatening messages electronically are covered under Section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and can incur fines of up to £2,500.

Many social media platforms allow students to post statements that ordinarily would not be said in a face-to-face conversation. Consequently, some students use the sites to participate in online bullying or to threaten harm to other students. Cyber bullies use the anonymity of the Web to hurt others without witnessing the consequences.

While your own family values will tell you what acceptable online activity is for your children, I encourage you to continue to talk to your children about social media safety and privacy. Some of these sites give students a false sense of security about the privacy of what they are posting. Parents should be aware of what their children are writing on the Internet and what others are posting in reply. These Web sites are public domain, and anything posted there can be seen by anyone who has Internet access. Although most of what is written is not immoral, offensive, or illegal, some of it is. A reminder too, that social media sites set their lower age limits at 13 for good reasons – young people have to be taught how to communicate with each other appropriately and respectfully online. Typically anyone below year 9 who has joined such a social media site has done so under false pretenses.

Since September we have dealt with many parents who have been truly shocked at the level of online activity their child is engaging in and the level of danger their child has been subjected to. This is made all the worse as typically a mobile phone is provided and asked for under the pretense of 'keeping safe'. Ideally, we are asking you, as typically the bill payer and therefore someone who is unknowingly financing this activity, to help stop it. Your child should share the PIN they have for their phone with you. On a weekly basis, please ask them to go through the content of the various apps they use e.g. Snapchat, Instagram, messages, Viber etc. If inappropriate content is found, please confiscate the phone and make us aware of any issues. Please go through their contact list and ask them who each contact is and get them to delete those contacts they do not know, or have only known online.

Worryingly, some children now have 'Decoy apps' on their phones, which are designed to lock away passwords, etc, but are now also being used to lock away photos and content the phone user does not want seen by others. Again, a strong, open relationship with your child and asking them to explain the use of their various apps, protects against such use. If you find such conversations cause friction then there are apps, e.g. Our Pact, whereby controls and time limits can be put on your child's phone so that they know the limits.

A significant amount of communication happens whilst students are playing on their games consoles and when messaging through games as they are linked to the Internet. We would ask you to monitor this also, particularly if your child spends a lot of time in his/her own bedroom on a console.

Lastly, copies of e-communications, Snapchat etc. are held by the mobile phone carriers and can be made available to the police on request. Just because a message appears to disappear, this does not mean it has.

Social media does not stop at home. It carries over into the school day. Students are mimicking the behaviour they exhibit online in their daily communications with each other in school. Sadly we are seeing and hearing students treating each other with a lack of respect in the same manner with which they communicate online.

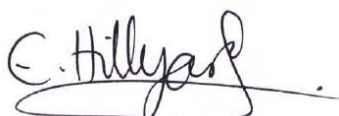
We will not infringe on a student's freedom of speech, however, we will hold students accountable for the inappropriate use of technology while on school grounds. We will also report to the police any posts that we perceive to be threatening to the well-being of any student or adult. We are asking that students come forward to report others that are using these sites for destructive purposes aimed at harming others.

We encourage you to establish rules and guidelines to ensure the safety of your child while on the Internet. Some Web sites offer parental or family guidance for Internet safety as well as information about all the latest apps; for example, NSPCC located online at <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>.

Lastly, we would add that online activity is seriously depriving some of our students of sleep as they take their electronic devices to their rooms and a number of apps, e.g. Snapchat, reward users to be the last one to reply in a conversation thread. Good practice is that mobile devices are turned off and left in the kitchen overnight. Periods of detox from electronic devices promotes improved mental health.

Thank you for your support and cooperation in keeping our students safe. If you have questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact your child's Form Tutor, Head of Year, or SAFE Manager.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Hillyard', with a horizontal line underneath.

Ed Hillyard
Deputy Head