

1 February 2024



Dear Parents and Carers

Social Media and Mobile Phones

In June 2022, I wrote to all parents about my increasing concerns regarding the misuse of mobile phones and social media by many of our students. Unfortunately, there has been a recent increase in online incidents so I must write regarding this matter again.

The problems:

Mobile phones provide young people with largely unlimited access to each other which is often not seen by adults. Children in their early teens simply do not have the maturity to manage this level of responsibility; we often find that children say and do things online that they would not dream of doing in person because the consequences of their actions seem less real. The main issues we see are the use of messaging and social media to bully or be unkind directly and the creation of anonymous social media accounts that are designed to bully and defame.

We have also seen recent examples of students using their phones to take photographs in College. I must stress that this behaviour is taken very seriously as a safeguarding risk and will result in suspension or permanent exclusion.

Almost all bullying that we deal with in College is initiated on social media outside of College. We then end up dealing with the consequences of this in College. As well as young people using their own accounts to say unpleasant things to others, accounts are regularly set up anonymously with the sole purpose of being cruel. This is a national issue. Some of these accounts give cruel descriptions of children, asking followers to guess who is being described. Some make defamatory comments about staff and use photographs of staff members that they have taken from elsewhere to ridicule, bully or libel them.

This causes distress for staff and students alike across the country to the point where teaching unions have attempted to engage with social media platforms to prevent it. However, these companies continue to do little to stop these damaging actions. We report these accounts as soon as we are aware of them but platforms are slow to remove them, and do nothing to prevent new accounts taking their place.

Bullying is as old as mankind but the evolution of mobile phones and social media allow for anonymity, which increases the problem. The majority of parents that we contact about this matter have no idea what their children are doing on social media and are not monitoring this closely, if at all.

What is the College doing?

We do not allow phones in College. However, we have seen the number of students attempting to use phones in College increase over the last term. This is absolutely not acceptable and will always result in confiscation. This is non-negotiable. Further sanctions are also likely when students use their phones to deliberately flout this rule, up to and including permanent exclusion. We ask parents to support us in ensuring students understand that they must not use mobile phones in College. This is to protect the learning and the well-being of all of our community. Taking and sharing photographs of others in a school setting can present significant safeguarding risks. Whilst younger children may not be able to understand this, parents can so, again, I ask for your support in ensuring your child does not pose this risk to others, however inadvertently.

Our students are regularly taught about online safety, anti-bullying and kindness, and we educate them about the potential of social media to be damaging. However, those who use social media to bully are often not doing so because of a lack of education: these are deliberate choices. We will continue to address issues as they arise but parental oversight of mobile phone use is essential as we cannot control what young people do on their phones at evenings and weekends.

Without the support of social media companies, it can be very difficult to identify the perpetrators of anonymous online accounts. Again, parental monitoring is the best method of prevention. When we do identify students who have set up anonymous accounts to bully or harass others, including staff, the consequences will be serious: we will apply our most serious sanctions, up to and including permanent exclusion. Where content is discriminatory or libellous, we will also refer the case to the police.

What should parents do?

What is very disappointing is the number of students who follow such anonymous accounts. This gives encouragement to the perpetrators and signals approval for their cruelty, and thus makes the follower complicit in the bullying. It is no different to being with a gang of people who are bullying someone in person: you might not say anything but you are choosing to be there. I therefore ask parents to ensure their children go through their social media and disassociate themselves from any account that contains cruelty, bullying or libellous comments against others.

Everyone would like a society that is free from bullying but the responsibility cannot fall to schools alone. If your child has access to a phone, tablet or any other device, please ensure they are using it appropriately. www.internetmatters.org, [socialmedia \(thinkuknow.co.uk\)](http://socialmedia(thinkuknow.co.uk)) and [Social media | NSPCC](http://Socialmedia|NSPCC) are useful sources of information for parents. Some parents tell us they will not look at their child's phone because it is an invasion of their privacy. However, if children are aware that anything on their phone may be seen by trusted adults (as part of the privilege of having a phone), they are much more sensible in their usage. The College has the right to search mobile phones if we believe the content 'could be or has been used to cause harm; to disrupt teaching or break school rules, including carrying out cyber-bullying. The device will be confiscated and the data or files should be retained as evidence as a breach of school discipline.' It is much better if this can be managed by parents but if it is not, we will act and the sanctions will be serious.

Every year I am shocked by the number of platforms students are using for which they are underage. There is a lot of evidence to show how addictive social media usage is and the negative impact it has on mental health. Yet our students are often permitted to have several of these accounts and they usually tell us that their parents do not monitor how they are using them. The Internet Matters website above explains the risks with some of the apps you may find on your child's phone.

Parents and carers have a clear role here in teaching children to use social media responsibly and kindly. Children should not be permitted to use platforms for which they are underage. The age limit for all social media is at least 13 years and so Year 7, and many of Year 8 should not be using social media at all. Even once children are legally old enough to have social media accounts, it is not necessarily appropriate for them to do so because they lack the maturity to do so safely.

It is really important that parents and carers know what their children are doing on their phones and online and do not assume it must be someone else's children to whom I am referring. As children progress towards adulthood they will, of course, want greater privacy. However, this comes with the maturity of being able to use social media responsibly, safely and kindly. We generally notice far fewer issues as students progress into the older years.

Thank you for your support.

With best wishes



Alex Newton
Principal