

Brampton Areas Schools Consortium (BASC)



Dear Parents,

As you are probably aware, schools now teach children much more than just arithmetic and how to spell correctly. In addition to the traditional curriculum we are also expected to teach children how to stay safe, both in the real-world and online. We teach children that social media sites are designed for an older audience than them, and that they present specific dangers to children their age. We stress that each has a minimum age for users, much like fairground rides have minimum heights.

As a group, we are increasingly alarmed at the number of pupils who are regularly using social media on their own devices, and with their own accounts. Children openly tell us about their Snapchat, Twitter and X-Box Live accounts and their use of these on tablets, consoles and smartphones. Younger pupils role-play taking selfies and uploading them. Whilst some install the apps without parental knowledge, most state that a parent helped them set it up!

We want to reiterate that **no** primary-age pupil should be accessing **any** of the mainstream social media platforms. Each of them has a minimum age of thirteen or above and, as such, a child below this age accessing them does so in direct contravention of the terms and conditions of the service. As a result, if such a child observes, is tricked into or actively engages in activity that leads them into harm via the services, it will be deemed to be their own fault. In addition, the companies operating the sites are frequently based offshore, and do not fall under UK Law.

Many parents may think they can help their children to deal with the potential problems, by 'keeping an eye on it' and that restricting access is too difficult in a world where 'everyone does it'. Truthfully, there is no way to control the dangers presented by social media. Anyone using social media with malicious intent will also be well-practiced in quickly gaining and applying emotional and/or physical leverage that will prevent your child from sharing concerns with you. Examples of the dangers posed by social media are listed overleaf. If an underage child is using any of these services, we believe they are already in harm's way.

We urge all parents to take control of their children's use of digital devices and access to social media.

None of the children in our schools should have access to any of the mainstream social media apps and platforms through their own account.

Children will naturally want to be part of what they perceive to be one of the primary reasons digital devices exist – to Instagram their meals, follow their favourite celebrities on Twitter and to chat with their friends at any time of day and night. As adults, we need to teach them that not all is as it seems and that this part of their device's feature list simply isn't for them, yet.

There are many ways to tackle this, the first of which is by activating the parental security settings on devices. This alone is not enough – children need to know **WHY** they can't use these apps too, which means **talking** about it.

We recognise that this is a challenging topic for parents – not only in terms of the unpalatable nature of the dangers, and in overcoming the peer pressure that drives children's desire to 'be part of it' but also in terms of feeling they might know more than you do. Staff in all our schools are happy to discuss any aspect of online safety with parents. Each of our schools also delivers parent awareness sessions in one form or another, usually on an annual basis. If you'd like to find out more of your own accord www.parentzone.org.uk is a fantastic place to start and they even have a Twitter feed you can follow with your own account!

This is a problem that is only going to become greater and that neither schools nor parents can overcome alone – we ask that you work with us to reiterate and enforce the age-restrictions that exist on these platforms to ensure that the children within our community are kept safe from the harm they increasingly cause to children and young teens.

Regards,

Headteachers of the Brampton Area Schools Consortium

Bewcastle, Brampton, Castle Carrock, Crosby-on-Eden, Fir Ends, Gilsland, Great Corby, Hallbankgate, Hayton, Irthington, Lanercost, Lees Hill, Shankhill, Warwick Bridge

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EXAMPLES OF THE DANGERS SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENTS TO PRIMARY-AGED CHILDREN

SNAPCHAT – not as short-lived as you’d imagine: We have recently been advised by police that there is an active circle of users employing fake Snapchat profiles to gain access to the social address lists of ever younger children by working downwards from older teens. With these profiles, they are able to groom children of various ages, tricking them into sharing images of themselves, or those they have been sent by their ‘real’ friends by taking a screenshot before it deletes itself. Any image harvested and shared in this way will include the sender’s username, which will allow them to be contacted by anyone who subsequently sees it.

These are then distributed widely, within the circle itself and beyond it. The impact of this is most keenly felt within our local secondary schools, but the grooming frequently starts long before this. Some of our schools have already been contacted by local police when they have been able to identify one of our pupils from an image found within a collection uncovered as part of investigations into sharing of adult content; frequently they are innocuously included amongst other, more extreme, sexualised images.

‘AGE-APPROPRIATE’ ADVERTISING: Once an account is created, all platforms assume that the date of birth given is accurate and will direct advertising at the user accordingly. Similarly, within the terms and conditions there is usually a clause that allows them to sell that user as a piece of data to other parties.

This means that an eight year old signed up as a 13-year old will receive advertising aimed at an individual five years older throughout the lifetime of that account. At eight, they may receive invitations to pay-as-you play gaming; by 11 they may be receiving adverts for e-cigs, contraception and driving lessons, as well as less savoury content; at 13 they will be considered an adult, and receive invitations to dating agencies and adverts for alcohol. The danger is that this becomes normalised – children begin to believe that others their age are accessing these things, and follow suit.

BODY IMAGE / FAKE REALITY: Many social sites like Instagram and Facebook increasingly normalise a lifestyle that most adults recognise as a ‘fantasy reality’ – one in which the sun always shines, every day is a holiday, and having an all-over tan is the only way to be. They show celebrities confidently showing the world how they look – albeit with the veneer of make-up, a 7-day fitness regime and a nutritionist-led diet. Facebook feeds contain ‘news’ that delivers truth and lies in equal measure. Children simply don’t have the relevant world experience to see through the smoke and mirrors.

CYBERBULLYING : Once the preserve of the secondary school, as younger pupils have joined the smartphone user-base they have become exposed to cyberbullying. Some have been victims, others have become the instigators. Since many users now access various different platforms, bullies frequently have access to a significant amount of personal information. Instagram photographs may give them an insight into the victim’s home and hobbies. Written posts reveal vulnerabilities. A child’s likeness from a seemingly innocent selfie can be cut and pasted onto other images. Worst of all, friend lists give bullies access to everyone the victim knows and trusts. For young children and teens the results can be devastating.

Primary-aged children are not emotionally, developmentally or socially ready for any of the challenges presented by social media. The age restrictions are there for their protection. Please ensure they are followed.



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