



The Oak-Tree Group of Schools

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Dear Parents

Re: Internet Safety

As we think more and more about internet safety, and to coincide with National Internet Safety Day today, I thought it would be worth sending this letter and the attached helpsheets to keep you informed about some of the more popular social media and gaming websites/apps that children are accessing. These are **Roblox, Facebook, Snapchat** and **Instagram**.

As e-technology leaps forward week by week, so too does the appeal to our young people and the need to keep them safe. The social messaging and gaming websites and apps are here to stay and are only going to increase over time. They all have their uses and can be fantastic tools for communication if used in the right way and in the right hands.

Websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Skype, Snapchat, Whats App, Viber and ooVoo, to name but a few, offer excellent opportunities for communication and social connections, but were created with an older audience in mind and many, including Facebook and Instagram, are specifically for those over 13 years old.

As part of our Computing and PSHE curricula, including assemblies and visiting speakers, we teach children from Year 1 upwards about the potential dangers of the internet and how to stay safe. We use age-specific terminology, websites and local safeguarding board-approved YouTube clips to teach them to avoid direct messages from strangers and not to share personal information with anybody they do not know in person. We also do our best to provide our children with the awareness and knowledge they need in order to recognise and avoid dangerous, destructive or unlawful behaviour and to respond appropriately.

Clearly, children are not able to access any social media websites or apps, or any other inappropriate content, on school computers or devices, as they are blocked by our servers. However, we do hear from some children that they come across certain sites at home or with friends if not supervised carefully.

We live in an age when our children are often going to be more in-tune with the latest technology than we are, and the advice from children's safeguarding organisations is always to be vigilant and to know what content our children are accessing. Our children are growing up immersed in a society that has become dependent on powerful computers, including smart phones, iPads, interactive online games and virtual communities.

Most social media websites/apps are age-restricted. Facebook, for example, is advertised as being for people from 13 years upwards. However, there are rarely any strict controls to check users' ages when creating accounts and it is very easy to type in a false date of birth to gain full, unrestricted access.

Social media websites/apps are designed to help us to communicate with our friends and others. Given the hundreds of millions of people accessing social media messaging, however, there is often no way of knowing who is on the other end of a message – and this is where we often read about children being 'groomed' by others.

Gaming websites/apps are becoming increasingly popular, but as they have often been created by adults for adults, some of the content and language may be inappropriate. For example, often when content is user-generated the graphics might not be very life-like but might feature weapons with blood, stabbings, beheadings etc. Most social media and gaming websites/apps have tools built in to protect children, and the best carry the 'Kidsafe' mark on their front pages.



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Any reported incidents of misuse of social media sites happen at home when children have access to websites and apps that are blocked in school. With this in mind, we feel it important to highlight the risks of unregulated use of tablets, mobile phones and computers so you can make informed decisions as to whether to allow your child to have a profile or not and when and how to monitor their use.

Should you decide to allow your child to have an online social media profile, it would be worth noting the following advice from various children's safeguarding organisations:

1. **Make use of the safety features or parent controls available on website/app**
Often there is a pin or password for parents to restrict content such as inappropriate language or direct messaging with strangers. Check that your child's profile is set to private and that only his/her friends can see information he/she posts.
2. **Block and report**
Make sure your child knows how to block users if necessary and that he/she reports inappropriate messaging both to you and to the moderators who monitor the website/app. Most websites/apps have this function.
3. **Be vigilant**
Show an interest in the games your child is playing and the sites being used. Monitor your child's use and talk to him/her about safe and appropriate online behaviour such as not sharing personal information and not posting or messaging offensive or inappropriate messages or photos.
4. **Restrict access to certain rooms**
There should be no reason for a child to use a mobile phone or tablet in a toilet or bathroom. Safeguarding organisations say that doing so may indicate that they are taking naked photographs to share. Similarly, it might be worth restricting access in the bedroom and, depending on the age, keeping it to where your child is in direct sight.
5. **Discourage or disconnect direct messaging with strangers**
There should be no need for an adult to contact a child directly, but many social media and gaming websites/apps (such as Roblox) have this built in as a default setting. Make sure your child knows to speak to you straight away if the chat goes from being about the games to meeting up offline, sharing personal information or receiving/sending photos.
6. **Set rules about spending money in games**
Many games encourage in-app purchases to generate additional income. Make sure your child realises that it is possible to spend real money while playing on gaming sites, or you might be left with a large bill for in-app purchases.
7. **Know what your child is accessing**
Set up your own profiles or play games yourself so that you understand how the websites/apps work and can see any specific dangers. Ask your child to accept you as his/her online 'friend' so you know what he/she is posting online.
8. **Encourage open dialogue about messaging**
Keep an open dialogue with your child about the websites and applications he/she uses online and, if needs be, ask him/her to no longer use them due to the potential dangers. Check that your child understands the importance of keeping his/her personal information safe and remind him/her to come to you if he/she sees something inappropriate, mean comments or if anything worries him/her within the game/website/app.

When monitoring your son/daughter's internet use, please remind yourself of the most common concerns of social media:

- Many sites use 'targeted' advertising and therefore your child could be exposed to adverts of a sexual or other nature, depending on the age they stated when they registered. They may have lied about their age to get an account, making them appear older than they are and increasing this risk.



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- Young people may accept friend requests from people they don't know in real life, which could increase the risk of inappropriate contact or behaviour.
- Language, games, groups and content posted or shared on social media is **not** moderated, and therefore can be offensive, illegal or unsuitable for young people.
- Photographs shared by users are **not** moderated and therefore young people could be exposed to inappropriate images or even post their own.
- Social media sites can be exploited by bullies and for inappropriate contact.
- Social media sites cannot and do not verify their members, so it is important to remember that if your son/daughter can lie about who they are online, so can anyone else.

There are many organisations that provide far more in-depth help and support both on a general and specific level. Some of the main ones are:

- <http://www.internetmatters.org>
A website to help you to know more about parental controls, including how to block your children from installing applications on their devices without your permission.
- www.ceop.police.uk.
If you ever have any concerns about the communication between your child and someone they have never met and only know online, you should report this to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP) via this link.
- www.askaboutgames.com
A website with advice tailored to families about gaming, including the popular games such as Roblox, Minecraft, Grand Theft Auto etc.
- www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/hot-topics/gaming
Childnet's advice to parents about the various gaming sites used by children and how to keep them safe while playing.
- www.thinkuknow.co.uk
CEOP's information website with useful tips explaining how to keep your child safe online.

Although the aim of this letter and the attached helpsheets is not to scaremonger or overplay the potential dangers to our young people, I appreciate that the subject of internet safety is a minefield and that we all need advice on how to help keep our children safe in a world that is growing ever-more technological. For this reason I am looking to organise 'internet safety' days at each school in the Summer Term for outside specialists to work with children, staff and parents at various points during and after a school day. I will write again when these sessions are confirmed, but in the meantime good luck!

With kind regards

Yours sincerely

Matthew Hagger

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Group Principal



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