

SOCIAL MEDIA AND E-SAFETY

There are many different social media platforms used by young people, which allow them to chat and share photos, videos and other content with their “friends” or “followers”. Are they safe for young people? At what age should my child start using social media?

Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat all have a legal age of 13. All students in Year 7 and most students in Year 8 are therefore not legally allowed to use these platforms **and we urge you not to allow your child to use them.**

Note that the 13+ age restriction is used by most social media companies because it is against the law in the USA for companies to collect personal data for children under the age of 13. It has nothing to do with the appropriateness of these social media platforms for our young people.

Recent studies have shown an enormous surge in mental health issues and admissions to hospital with self-harm in the 10-14 age group which ties in directly with the advent of social media.

At least 50% of the issues that we currently deal with in College are as a direct result of communications that have happened over social media. This includes the creation of anonymous groups to bully others, sharing of inappropriate images, making threats to other students, and young people actively promoting self-harm. Most students below the age of 14 are simply not equipped mentally to deal with the pressures that this puts on them and this often spills over into the college taking the focus away from their learning. Students are still not grasping the fact that once they add images or text to any of the platforms these do not disappear and are often a source of embarrassment or harassment in the future.

Social media platforms are a very new phenomenon, and whilst there may be a strong desire from your child or peer pressure from their friendship groups to sign up to a particular service, parents should not be made to feel that it is in any way “normal” for young people to have access to these platforms. In fact, there are very real and clear risks involved and very good reasons for parents to say “no” or “not yet”.

Below are some of the most popular currently with students:

Instagram

Age: 13+

TCOLC Recommends: 16+

Instagram allows users to share photos and short videos with their “followers” and to “like” and comment on those posted by others.

Dangers:

- Much of the content on Instagram is aimed at adults and may be age-inappropriate for minors.
- Your child may be approached by adults not known to you.
- Students can easily be harassed or bullied, with unkind comments made about their photos and uploads.
- There is controversy around Instagram's algorithm, which can "push" increasingly graphic and harmful images to young people. For instance, a vulnerable student who follows a hashtag such as #sad or #depressed may start receiving stylised images glorifying self-harm and suicide. (See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-46966009/instagram-helped-kill-my-daughter>)

Snapchat

Age: 13+

TCOLC Recommends: 16+

Snapchat is an app that lets you send a photo, short video or message to your contacts. The 'snap' appears on screen for up to 10 seconds before disappearing, or there is an option to have no time limit. There's also a feature called Snapchat Story that lets you share snaps in a sequence for up to 24 hours.

Dangers:

- Students are sharing their location with strangers unless they enable "ghost mode"
- Students may be tempted to send photos they might not otherwise send because they think they will "disappear" after a short time.
- Images that are shared do not always disappear – viewers can easily screenshot these and repost them somewhere else.
- Your child may receive messages or request for sexual images from people you don't know
- Snapchat can be used for bullying as bullies think the messages will disappear leaving no evidence.

Tiktok (formerly Musical.ly)

Age: 13+

TCOLC Recommends: 15+

Tiktok gives users the opportunity to share 60 second short videos with friends, family or the entire world. Content is mostly funny sketches or lip-sync videos featuring special effects.

Dangers:

- The language in the videos often includes a lot of swearing and can be highly inappropriate for minors.
- Strangers can directly contact children using the app
- Students may be tempted or feel pressured to take inappropriate risks with their content to get more of a following or “likes” for their videos.

Advice for parents on use of social media

If you do decide to allow access to social media platforms for your child, consider implementing some or all of the following rules:

- Agree which social media platforms your child is allowed to use.
- Make sure their accounts have privacy settings turned on.
- Show an interest in what your child is doing online. Discuss how they are using it, what they are posting, who they are adding as friends and why.
- Ask your child to give you their username/password so you can check on how they are using it.
- Ask your child to add you as a friend/follower, so that you will see what content they are posting online.
- Have a “downstairs only” rule for mobile phones, tablets and other internet-enabled devices.

ONLINE GAMING AND E-SAFETY

The festive holiday often brings new consoles and games into the home, many of which include online content. These online games involve interacting with many other players, which means your child will be talking with strangers in an environment they feel completely comfortable and at ease in.

Many games sites allow the user to create a profile, using personal information, and without the proper safety precautions this could be open for all to see (much like a social networking profile).

Online games often involve a chat function; this may be text chat or voice chat. The same risks that apply to general chat rooms also apply to in-game chat – particularly around personal information and inappropriate conversations / language. Players may join clans, guilds or similar groups within these games, and these may encourage their members to use 3rd party forums and communication platforms such as Discord, TeamSpeak, Ventrillo, Mumble, Skype, or Curse.

Whilst many such groups will consist of like-minded gamers with a mutually agreed code of conduct, they are essentially totally unmoderated spaces, with no restrictions on language used or topics discussed. Many gamers are adults and conversation may be highly unsuitable for minors. Whoever sets up these groups can easily identify the IP address (and therefore home location) of all the other members. Teenager Breck Bednar was lured to his death by a man he met on TeamSpeak whilst online gaming. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-30786021>)

Advice to Parents on online Gaming

- Gamertags/username should not contain personal information about the child or match their email address – e.g Chloe2008 might give away the name, gender and age of the child.
- Ensure any privacy settings within a game are set to the highest level.
- Take an interest in your child's online gaming habits. Discuss what games they play, who they play with and talk to, and how they know their online "friends".
Remind your child not to share information that may give away their location (including their school) and not to share personal information or photos. They should be suspicious of anyone who repeatedly asks them for these things. Let them know they can talk to you if they have concerns.
- Most games and consoles have some sort of report feature and will allow you to block certain players. Make sure your child knows how to do this.
- Any internet enabled device, including games consoles, laptops, iPads, phones, should be kept in communal spaces like the living room, and not allowed in bedrooms or where children are often alone.
- 3rd party communication platforms like Discord, TeamSpeak etc are not appropriate for young people, who should keep their in-game chat within the game itself.
Follow the age rating on Games and Apps. As well as having more graphic horror, gore, bad language, age-inappropriate content and violence, a 15 or 18 certificate game will not have the same restrictions and e-safety precautions as one deemed suitable for a 12 year old. Lack of appropriate safeguards is often the primary reason why a game is rated 18.
- Consoles include extensive parental controls which allows you to block/allow many online gaming features, such as chat, adding friends, etc. You can prevent your child from playing 15 and 18 games, set time limits and the hours of the day that the console can be used. If you are not sure how to do this, ask a relative or friend, or google "how to set parental controls on <my console>".

Here are some useful links:

- <http://www.net-aware.org.uk/networks/?order=-popularity>
- <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/Secondary>
- <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety>
- <http://www.ceop.police.uk/>
- <https://parentzone.org.uk/home>
- <https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/>