Guidance for parents on the use of social networking media

Young people love to communicate with their peers and they love to use the different types of electronic media for socialising. Examples of social networking media are Facebook, MySpace, Blackberry Messenger or other Instant Messaging (sometimes with a webcam), chat rooms, Skype, Twitter, or simply texting or sending emails. When used wisely social networking media present no harm – indeed there can be significant benefits – but there are several ways in which they can be used unwisely:

1. **Spending too much time using social networking media**
    Much time can be wasted and they can be a serious distraction to school work. There can be an element of addiction to people's behaviour, and sleep can be disrupted if mobile phones or computers are available at night in bed.

2. **Saying unpleasant things to others or posting unwelcome images**
    Sometimes young people can be drawn into saying unpleasant things to others that they would not say directly – there can be a bravado born of the remoteness. Also, images can be posted which cause upset or distress to others. The unpleasantness can be quite subtle, for example on Facebook simply posting 'Like' to an unpleasant comment/image posted by someone else.

3. **Making public their private details**
    Young people sometimes think that their privacy settings protect their private information. However, **no information posted electronically is guaranteed to be private** and personal information such as addresses or telephone numbers can potentially be accessed by those who might abuse it. Occasionally young people give others access to their passwords – they should **never** do this, even to a trusted friend, as it can result in identity theft.

4. **Posting inappropriate or very personal images or comments**
    Since no information posted electronically is totally secure, young people can be embarrassed by others gaining access to inappropriate or very personal images or comments. This can include employers who are increasingly checking the internet for information on potential employees. **Once an image or comment has been posted, the owner has potentially lost control over it forever, even if subsequently deleted as it may have been accessed by another person and saved.**

What parents can do

1. The most important thing you can do to ensure your child uses social networking wisely is to talk to them about it, and advise them about avoiding the above pitfalls. Keep the channels of communication open as far as possible - research indicates that young people who talk to their parents about social networking use it more wisely.

2. If you permit your child to use social networking media, try to educate yourself about them, particularly about privacy settings and the facilities for reporting abuse of web sites. In particular, if you allow your child to join Facebook (the age of eligibility is 13), you may consider joining yourself and ensuring your child designates you as a 'friend' so that you can access their site.   The internet has many advice sites which you may find helpful, including **fbparents.org** and **direct.gov.uk/en/Parents**.

3. If your child is bothered by someone through a social networking medium, **try to ensure the evidence is not deleted** as it may be helpful in dealing with the matter.

4. If you have concerns about social networking issues involving your child, you may wish to contact the school for advice. The school cannot deal with these problems alone but can work in partnership to try to support parents who have concerns.