Safe internet use and cyber-bullying
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The internet (including mobile phones) has become one of the main ways - If not *the* main way that young people communicate nowadays. There are many advantages to using the internet, and specifically the use of internet social networking sites can be especially helpful. Social networking sites allow people to connect with one another in a way that is fast and efficient. Young people use social networking sites to stay in touch with and find out more about their friends, meet new people with similar interests, exchange and receive feedback on ideas, learn about new things, access educational tools and much more. Unfortunately, communicating this way comes with certain disadvantages and possible risks. It is important that young people are aware of these

risks and learn effective ways to keep themselves safe. Some disadvantages that young people may encounter when using the internet and social networking sites may include the following:

- It can become a popularity contest – "How many people are YOU connected with?" This could lead to young people connecting with people on social networking sites even if they don't know who they are.

- Information that is posted online can be seen by everyone if we are not using our privacy settings correctly or not being careful about the information we put out there. This can have negative implications for now but also for later on in life. This is something that people (especially young people) do not always realise.

- False information is often posted on social networking sites, by peers or strangers. "Predators" exist and may be pretending to be someone that they aren't… setting up

false network pages in order to connect with young people.

- Misunderstandings may arise due to the lack of face-to-face and verbal cues.

- As young people communicate more in this way there are less face-to-face and verbal interactions – a skill that is necessary for later on. Young people may be losing out on the opportunities to practice this skill. Online communication can facilitate but should not replace human contact… the virtual world must not become a substitute for the real world.

"Cyber bullying" is becoming an increasing problem amongst young people today. Cyber bullying is online harassment which is carried out through an internet service such as email, chat rooms, discussion groups, instant messaging and also through mobile phones. Harassment can include posting personal information or videos designed to hurt or embarrass someone else, online threats and rude texts. Instant messages and text messages also count as cyber bullying. Sending hate-messages, creating web sites designed to humiliate someone, forwarding private emails, taking a humiliating photograph using a camera phone and posting it on the internet. These are some examples of what young people are exposed to on a daily basis.

Cyber bullying occurs 24/7 and can be more extreme than other forms of bullying because it occurs within the child's home as well as outside. It can be

harsher, more far reaching and seemingly inescapable. Research indicates that as many as 41.5% of victims tell no one because they are afraid nothing can be done or that parents will limit their use of computer and/or mobile phone. The bullies can be strangers but are often people whom the victim already knows.

As a parent you need to understand and learn about the "net" generation - to learn about the different types of cyber bullying and monitor your child's use of these technologies. Encourage your children to be selective about what information they are posting online, and also who they are connecting with. There are also many things that you can and need to do to teach, help and be on the lookout for warning signs of negative online activity. Try to help your children understand that cyber bullying is harmful and talk to them regularly about their online activities. Perhaps consider establishing a parent-child Internet-use contract. Encourage your children to talk to you or another trusted adult if they are receiving offensive messages or postings and advise them not to respond. Check regularly on them if they are on their computer or phone and look out for the warning signs that they may be involved in cyber bullying or a victim of it. If possible, ask your children to use their computer/laptop in a public space in the home. Use websites that translate the internet lingo - see www.netlingo.com. If you are concerned that cyber bullying is occurring then check children's online communications when possible. Advise your child to delete their current accounts and open new ones if they are repeatedly receiving harassing e-mails. You could also advise them to use the block or ban feature on instant messaging and use privacy settings. Parents should install parental control filtering software and/or tracking programmes if they have concerns.

If cyber bullying does occur, parents need to keep a record of e-mails or messages in case proof is necessary. Contact the school for advice if the perpetrator is another student and share the evidence.

Cyber bullying can have severe consequences and should not be ignored. Just because it isn't face-to-face doesn't mean it doesn't have a big impact - it can actually be worse! 60% of young people feel that it is as bad as or worse than face-to-face bullying because they are never safe from attacks - not even when they are at home. This type of harassment can lead to severe psychological distress, for example low self–esteem, loss of confidence, stress, depression, eating disorders, self-harming, violence and even suicide.

Many parents ask the question 'shouldn't we just put our foot down and stop our kids using these sites?' The answer is 'no'. We don't stop young people from crossing the road because there is a risk that something bad might happen. We teach them to be careful and sensible. In the same way we need to teach them to use the internet in a safe and responsible way.

Take a look at these websites for further information about cyber-bullying and safe internet use:

www.kidshealth.org/teen/safety/safebasics/internet_safety.html

www.connectsafely.org

www.cyberbully.org/docs/disinhibition

www.cyberbullying.us /01_cyberbullyingfactsheet.pdf

www.cyberbullying.us /cyberbullying_emotional_consequences

www.cyberbullying.us /cyberbullying_warning_signs.pdf

www.cyberbullying.us /safe_responsible_social_networking.pdf