

## Safeguarding: How parents can protect their child online

Article contributed by Ms. Lesley-Ann Harrison, Secondary Deputy Principal/Designated Safeguarding Lead



At VSA we are committed to safeguarding, and promoting the welfare and wellbeing of our school community. We aim to maintain a safe learning and working environment in which students and staff feel secure and supported. Where there are safeguarding concerns, staff communicate these to the school's Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) - myself in Secondary, and Mr. Tom Woods (Deputy Principal) in Primary.

Working closely with our Student Support Services team of counsellors, social workers and nurses, we ensure that any report safeguarding concerns are reported and investigated thoroughly, acting immediately to best support any child who is at risk of harm, in any way.

The most common concerns reported to me are social media/internet related. Our students at VSA receive comprehensive advice on the responsible use of their laptops and phones, however there are repeated times when students do not make the wisest choices, or are the victims of inappropriate (and sometimes harmful) online behaviour of others.

As parents, you are ultimately responsible for your child's online safety – you want your child to be healthy and happy, to develop well both physically and mentally, and above all you want to be confident that your child is safe.

Humans learn through exploration and curiosity, and it is part of our job as teachers and parents to encourage that. However, as children develop and discover new experiences, we have to take more steps to ensure their safety, particularly online.

Depending on the age that your child is now they may already be used to using certain websites, apps and social networking sites. As they grow up, they will learn their way around the internet with ease. I am constantly amazed by how advanced our students are with their online usage, with the chances being that they know more about this area than most adults do. However, issues arise as children almost certainly don't have the life-experience and wisdom to handle all of the situations they encounter - which is why as parents and educators we need to work in partnership to keep our young people safe when they're online.

### Why is this so different from when we were young?

Until recent years, many homes had a family computer, on which parents could safely keep an eye on what their child was doing and introduce a degree of control using parental software. When students started to get their own devices for doing their homework and playing games, it became more difficult

to ensure they were visiting appropriate websites and not talking to strangers online. Now, of course, in the age of smartphones, effectively computers that can be used *anywhere and anytime* –parents find it challenging to monitor and control their child’s online behaviour.

Some of these potential online risks to children:

- Inappropriate contact: from people who may wish to abuse, exploit or bully them.
- Inappropriate conduct: because of their own and others’ online behaviour, such as the personal information they make public, for example on social networking sites. Unfortunately, children can also become cyberbullies, especially when encouraged by others.
- Inappropriate content: being able to access or being sexually explicit, racist, violent, extremist or other harmful material, either through choice or in error.
- Commercialism: being the targets of aggressive advertising and marketing messages.
- Gaining access to your personal information stored on your computer, mobile device or games console, and passing it on to others ... or using your financial details such as payment card information.
- Enabling viruses and spyware by careless or misinformed use of their or your computer, [smartphone](#), [tablet](#) or games console.

#### Our advice to you, as parents:

It’s never too late to reinforce boundaries:

- Keep up to date with the apps/sites your child is using, and discuss what you know with your child
- Review the settings on parental controls in line with your child’s age and maturity and adjust them if appropriate.
- Don’t allow your child to access apps that are not age-suitable.
- Talk frankly to your child about how they behave towards others, particularly with regard to what they post online. Have conversations about bullying, and posting hurtful, misleading or untrue comments. Make them aware of the dangers of behaviours like sexting and inappropriate use of webcams.
- Your child could be vulnerable to experimenting with accessing confidential information from the websites of other people or companies. Hacking amongst children is quite rare, but it does exist. Explain the dangers and consequences.

#### Here are some questions you could discuss with your child:

- Do you really know everybody on your ‘friends’ list?
- Do you know how to use and set privacy and security settings? Can you show me how?
- Do you ever get messages from strangers? If so, how do you handle them?
- Do you know anyone who has made plans to meet someone offline that they’ve only ever spoken to online?
- Are people in your group of friends ever mean to each other, or to other people, online or on phones? If so, what do they say? Has anyone ever been mean to you? Would you tell me about it if they were?
- Has anyone at your school, or anyone else you know, taken naked or intimate photos and sent them to other people, or received photos like that? Has anyone shared any pornography, or links to pornographic sites with you?

At VSA we are here to help, to support you as parents in encouraging responsible online use, and ensuring safety. However, we are not with your child after school hours, at the weekends, or during the holidays. As parents, take time to reflect on your current ways of monitoring your child's online behaviour; look at your child's phone, check through their laptop browsing history, and do not feel uncomfortable in reducing your child's screen-time, or closing off access to material that may cause them harm.

Further advice is available:

- <https://openvieweducation.co.uk/social-media-age-ratings/> (App age advice)
- <https://www.common sense media.org/homepage> (comprehensive online safety advice)

