

June 2022

Dear Parents and Guardians,

We are writing to you with regard to the misuse of information technology and social media by young people both generally and also at Berlin British School. The purpose of this letter is to describe the nature of what is a major concern across schools in the world today and then to outline what we as a school intend to do in order to address this problem.

Misuse of social media

One difficulty facing schools today is the ever-changing nature of social media, which even by the standards of the world in 2022 are particularly dynamic, with one variety replaced by another within months or even weeks. What, then, do we mean by “social media”? Put simply, we refer to any means by which information is exchanged electronically; this could be email, Skype, Facebook, Instagram or Whatsapp.

Why do social media often cause difficulties for young people and schools? In our experience, we have come across numerous reasons:

- Children may produce comments to one another via social media that they would never make to another person’s face. The ease with which messages can be sent, giving no opportunity for heads and tempers to cool, does encourage some young people to say things that they usually come to regret shortly afterwards.
- Another observation of ours is that the authors of such messages often use obscene language, sometimes without knowing what it means, to an extent that would be much less likely in normal conversation.
- The group forums used by some students encourage the targeting online of an individual.
- The inappropriate and sometimes even obscene and illegal messages produced by some young people via social media do not go away. The victims of such attacks will use them as evidence when seeking restitution. In years to come personnel departments may come across them.

Why do we as a school feel obliged to act?

We have no choice but to address this issue for the simple reason that unpleasant online exchanges between members of the school affect life *at* school. Today virtually every instance of a difficulty between students at BBS originates in a message sent online. Our duty of care to our pupils would not be met if we simply turned a blind eye to this problem.

What a parent can do to support responsible online behaviour by their child

The above is a very delicate topic since we do not wish to lecture parents who know their children better than we do. However, the points below may be of interest:

- The most straightforward approach is also perhaps the least realistic: to prevent your child(ren) from having access to social media. Officially, access to Facebook, for example, is only permitted from the age of thirteen.
- If your child does use social media, there is certainly a case for regulating and rationing the amount of time he/she has access to phones, etc. Some of the instances we have encountered of bullying on group forums have taken place not over several minutes but several hours.
- Some more advice would be to exercise particular care over your child's use of social media during Grades 6-8. By Grade 9, children do appear to establish a certain "etiquette" in terms of how they communicate with one another. Earlier in their education, however, online activity by young people is a dangerous novelty.

Some further points to consider

- Discuss digital citizenship with your child and agree expectations of online behaviour
- Consider how you supervise your child's use of digital technology and, for younger children, our advice is that online usage should be in 'public spaces' in the family home
- Ensure that your child knows and understands privacy settings for any social network applications that they use
- Encourage your child to tell an adult if they feel unsafe
- Find out the legal age for usage of social networking sites

Our policy as a school

Our policy is consistently applied in all cases of cyberbullying and/or whenever social media are used to cause hurt to members of the school community. Please see below:

- Where we are made aware of incidents involving misuse of social media and information technology affecting members of the school community, the evidence of this behaviour is sent to the offender's parents.
- If the offender repeats such behaviour, then he/she is externally suspended for five days.
- If the student continues to behave in this way, then he/she is permanently excluded from Berlin British School.

Parents might be interested in following up on the topic through the websites listed below:

<https://ineqe.com/>

<https://www.common sense media.org/>

<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>

<https://www.childnet.com/>

With best wishes

Dominic Coutts

(Head of Secondary)