

## ■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

### ONLINE SAFETY

# EDUCATING STUDENTS ON THE IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING

While schools can implement safeguards, the lack of oversight and unlimited, unsupervised use of social media at home remains a worry, writes **John Cremer**

Excitement is building over the potential for advances in technology to add a whole new dimension to teaching and learning in school classrooms and laboratories. Enthusiasts are predicting all kinds of scope to deliver more engaging lessons which encourage greater creativity, inspire faster understanding and take the strain out of onerous written projects and homework assignments.

That may indeed happen. But as anyone in the education community can attest, the change new technology brings is not always for the better.

That was ably illustrated by Unesco's decision to designate November 2 as the International Day Against Violence and Bullying at School, Including Cyberbullying, – the latter an unpleasant phenomenon that has gathered pace with the increasing ubiquity of smartphones and the proliferation of social media, which can bring emotional pain and turmoil to many young lives.

Research and examples detailing this were set out in an accompanying report which drew on findings from around the world. It noted, for instance, that in 26 countries in 2019 at least 10 per cent of learners aged eight to 10 had experienced some form of cyberbullying in the previous 12 months. And this figure rose to 20 per cent for those in the 12-to-14 age group.

The report also mentioned the recent news that more than 30 states in the US have filed lawsuits against Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp's parent Meta over the company's harmful impact on children's mental health. Importantly too, it drew attention to the need for proper policies, backed up by legislation, something which only 16 per cent of countries currently have in place. "We need to keep all children safe online," says Manos Antoninis, director of Unesco's Global Education Monitoring Report.

"Cyberbullying takes various forms and can have serious consequences for students' well-being and academic performance. [We must] address this through reporting mechanisms, appropriate use of technology in schools, with legislation, and by equipping teachers and children with skills to better protect themselves online."

Fortunately, leading schools in Hong Kong are fully alert and remain vigilant about evolving challenges. They have taken the initiative in setting rules, providing support, appointing specialist staff and keeping parents in the picture. And they have come to accept, albeit reluctantly, that the problem is a fact of modern-day life and won't just go away.

"It is impossible for any school to entirely prevent cyberbullying, but we take the issue extremely seriously and take numerous steps to minimise it," says Priya McPolin, assistant head of seniors and designated safeguarding lead at Malvern College Hong Kong.

"The majority of cases are low-level instances of unkindness on social media such as Instagram, WhatsApp and Discord where students can leave posts and make comments. But it is important to deal with these immediately when they are brought to our attention and before they escalate."

The school's overall approach has several key elements. These include open discussions as part of a digital citizenship course at the start of each year, embedding digital intelligence in the life skills programme, exploring concerns in tutor groups and at assemblies, and proactively raising cyber-related issues with parents during talks and presentations.



**“We teach techniques that help our students pause and reflect before they act, ensuring they are mindful of their digital footprint”**

DUFF DOUGLAS, CDNIS

There is also an “acceptable use of technology” policy, which is regularly reviewed to ensure it moves with the times and is in line with best practices adopted at other schools around the world.

The policy framework and specifics take reference from a range of relevant authorities, so that guidelines are up to date and fit for purpose. Deliberately, they are also designed to integrate with the clearly defined set of Malvern qualities and a code of conduct which spells out general expectations about student behaviour and demeanor.

"We have a very strong safeguarding team providing first-class, British-style pastoral care to protect students," says McPolin, alluding to the roles of housemaster or housemistress, head of year, and her own position. "When issues arise, which they do in every school, we are careful to deal with them in line with our policy on restorative justice."

Recently, an upsurge in cyberbullying via private messaging and the use and creation of memes has been a cause for concern. The main worry, though, is the lack of oversight at home, where parents often seem unwilling to check their children's devices and allow unlimited, unsupervised usage.

"Pupils find new apps and platforms quicker than parents or teachers, making it difficult to keep up with

**As smartphones and social media have become more ubiquitous, so too have opportunities for cyberbullying.**

Photo: Shutterstock

## GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

the speed of change," McPolin reveals. "For us, it is essential to bring parents into discussions with their children."

At Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS), efforts to nip cyberbullying in the bud similarly centre on building character by teaching values and a sense of responsibility.

This starts in the lower school, where teachers and counsellors do a lot of work instilling qualities like empathy and compassion towards others, while also giving students the tools to resolve conflict without escalating it.

Along the way, they explain what bullying is – and isn't – and why it is so hurtful. And, in due course, advisory classes in the upper school deal with the cyber aspects, not shying away from discussion of both the immediate and possible long-term repercussions.

"Older students have to understand that there are potential legal consequences for participating in cyberbullying," says Shelagh Hockley, head of upper school guidance at CDNIS. "I tell them why this is such a serious matter and what kinds of damage it can cause, not only to the victims, but also to their own reputation and character if they are the instigator. Once something is shared online, it is out there forever. So, students need to think about the long-term consequences, such as university acceptance or future careers being affected by decisions to post things on social media."

In shaping policies, CDNIS has turned to respected sources like Common Sense Media to ensure the school's approach is well informed and developmentally appropriate for students. And there is a "responsible user agreement" which pupils are given time to reflect on at the start of each school year. This sets out clear expectations for digital conduct, which mirror the six core values

– including responsibility, critical thinking and leadership – that are the bedrock of the school's ethos.

"We believe in the continuity of character – what we uphold in person is what we expect online," says Duff Douglas, CDNIS upper school vice principal.

"It is all about consistency in our approach to behaviour and expectations. We have woven this philosophy into our curriculum, empowering students to navigate the digital landscape with the same integrity and respect they show in the classroom."

The aim is to shift the focus from reactive measures to having proactive "emotional regulation" strategies, which recognise that adolescence is a time of significant change, and foster a safe, supportive online environment.

"We teach techniques that help our students pause and reflect before they act, ensuring they are mindful of their digital footprint," says Duff. "But we have also tailored our guidelines to encourage inquiry, stimulate creativity, and embrace cross-cultural perspectives."

If a problem does occur, students are expected to report it to a trusted adult at school – a teacher, counsellor or administrator – who may also explain that a single unkind comment on Instagram does not qualify as cyberbullying.

"We need to establish if this is actually part of an ongoing pattern of one-sided cruel behaviour," Hockley



**It's not possible to entirely stamp out cyberbullying, but schools are taking steps to minimise it.** Photo: Shutterstock

says. "If so, one of our vice principals will take the lead investigating since it is a disciplinary issue."

For Howard Tuckett, founding headmaster of Wycombe Abbey School Hong Kong, one continuing concern is that today's pervasive technology means children can no longer assume their home or bedroom is a place of sanctuary from unwanted attention.

"For children to flourish, they need to be protected from bullying and unkindness around the clock, every day," he says. "Our school, along with many others, will respond to any bullying whether it happens face to face or via an electronic device out of normal school hours."

"Clearly, though, access to technology in the evenings is a significant parenting issue."

## Blending the Best of the Local and International Education Systems

### Finding a Dream School for Your Beloved One

#### Why choose an English as Medium of Instruction Direct Subsidy Scheme School like St. Margaret's Co-ed.?

More and more parents turn their eyes to DSS schools for options with more flexibility in resources, teaching and learning. At St. Margaret's, our students are given ample time and opportunities to build up solid and sound learning habits and self-confidence. They are trained to be excellent multilingual communicators with a positive mindset, nurtured by a professional team of educators, caring teachers and life coaches on the school campus.

#### English as the Major Medium of Instruction

St. Margaret's Co-ed. as an EMI school provides an authentic English learning environment. The school appoints more than the usual number of native English-speaking teachers, currently 18. The use of Standard English is assured through the unique method of teaching Phonics in the Primary complete with teaching International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in the Junior Secondary. Performing Arts is incorporated as a subject in the curriculum. At the 74th Hong Kong Schools English Speech Festival, the school won 105 top three places in English Solo Verse-speaking and prose-reading, and the total number of Champions was 36.



#### Multilingual Education & Multicultural Campus

In line with the mission to nurture multilingual world citizens, St. Margaret's Co-ed. now offers the widest choice of language subjects, from English, Chinese taught in Putonghua to French, German, Japanese and Spanish.

Proficiency in a 3rd language will empower students with a competitive edge for admission to university or pursuing a career overseas.



St. Margaret's Co-ed. takes pride in building a multicultural campus composed of students of over 20 different nationalities. Study tours to overseas countries are conducted annually whereby students are exposed to foreign languages and cultures in authentic situations. Exchange student programmes are also organized with overseas partner schools.



#### One Sport and One Art for Each Student

Activities to build up students' other learning experiences are essential for an all-round education. St. Margaret's students enjoy very much their enriched school life by participating in a great variety of extra-curricular activities. Students' potential and self-confidence are developed through the programme "One Sport and One Art for Each Student".

Over the past years, St. Margaret's students have stretched their wings in different open and inter-school competitions, particularly speech, drama, music, athletics and dance. Their Secondary Boys' and Girls' Athletics Teams were promoted to Division I in the Inter-School Athletics Competition, becoming one of the top 16 and top 12 schools respectively in Hong Kong schools athletics.

#### Positive-thinking School, Positive-thinking Life

St. Margaret's education philosophy, "Positive-thinking School, Positive-thinking Life", is based on the can-do philosophy of the great American positive-thinking advocate, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale: Through Life Value Education, a formal subject in the curriculum, the school equips students with a positive mindset to face the uncertainties and challenges from this ever-changing world.



Sponsored Feature

#### Building of a New Wing

The building of a new wing with a swimming pool and 12 more classrooms has been completed. It enables the school to meet the increasingly diverse needs in teaching, learning and student development.



*The application period of S.1 2024/2025 is open from 22 September to 30 December 2023. Details of the application procedures and related notices are available from our school website.*

#### School Info : 2024 – 2025 School Fees:

P.1 – HK\$54,650/annum (in 10 instalments)

S.1 – HK\$47,710/annum (in 10 instalments)

\* Subject to the EDB's approval

\* For details of the Fee Remission and Scholarship Scheme, please visit our school website [www.smcesps.edu.hk](http://www.smcesps.edu.hk) (Printed copies could be obtained at our admission office upon request.)

Enquiries : Tel: (852) 2396 6675 Website: [www.smcesps.edu.hk](http://www.smcesps.edu.hk)  
Address: 33 Sham Mong Road, West Kowloon