School Safety and Crisis

Using Social Media Before, During, and After School Crises: Tips for Parents and Educators

School use of social media to communicate information has become increasingly common. Despite the challenges associated with social media use, parents, other caregivers, and educators can benefit from becoming more aware of social media use. This document examines how social media can be used before, during, and after school crises.

What is social media? The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students defines social media as "networking sites, messaging sites, texting, and other Web-based or mobile technologies that support social interaction" (2012, p. 5). Currently, the most common social media platforms are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. However, preferences change quickly, especially among young people. All such social media are considered as potential challenges and assets in the remainder of this document.

Why use social media? Many parents and caregivers are now more likely to use social media than the school website to find information. Social media platforms are relatively easy for most people to use, and they provide an alternative or supplemental way for schools to disseminate crisis-related information quickly. During times of crisis, the school and community can access information, seek connectedness, and find sharable content from school-based social media. Real time social media alerts or notifications can now reach smartphone users quickly and directly.

What are common crisis challenges associated with social media? Sometimes social media can contribute to psychological trauma and create other challenges. Young people may engage in cyberbullying or post embarrassing, traumatic, or inappropriate information through social media. Of great concern is the fact that social media posts have the potential for triggering or exacerbating crises, causing fear and panic, and creating *crisis contagion*, which involves one crisis leading to another crisis (e.g., 1–5% of suicides are believed to be due to contagion). Social media can be time consuming and intimidating for some educators, parents, and other caregivers to prioritize and monitor appropriately.

What can parents, caregivers, and educators do to get started? Schools often have a primary social media platform (i.e., one very commonly used system), as well as a secondary platform. Parents and educators are encouraged to "friend" or "follow" platforms used by a school of interest, so that information and resources may be accessed directly. Ideally, a broad range of crisis resources and information will be disseminated by the school's social media managers. From crisis prevention to crisis recovery, social media can provide accurate and up-to-date information as well as useful resources.

What can be expected from school-based social media? The U.S. Department of Education outlines five mission areas for high-quality school emergency operations planning: prevention,

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protection, mitigation, response, and recovery. Below are some examples of the types of resources related to these mission areas, which parents, caregivers, and teachers can expect to see on school social media.

Prevention (avoiding/deterring/stopping a crisis)

- Advance communication regarding the school's family reunification plan and procedures that will be followed in the event of early release and/or a crisis situation.
- Crisis prevention informational flyers.
- Information about crisis drills or trainings occurring in your school.
- Videos of drill procedures or other expectations (e.g., for a fire drill or earthquake).
- Notices to parents/guardians and community members with instructions on how to get information from the school's social media sites.
- Sample messages to post on social media sites that follow the site's guidelines (i.e., a message that has a 120 character limit).
- Guidance regarding the school's social media policy and procedures.
- The name of the person who will be responsible for reviewing and updating the social media sites during an emergency.

Protection (securing a school against man-made and natural disasters)

- Information on health and natural disaster and other crisis event health alerts.
- Through Google Alerts or other, similar apps, notification regarding when information is posted online or within social media, suggesting a dangerous or threatening situation.

Mitigation (minimizing the impact of a crisis event)

- Crisis facts (check back frequently, as it can take time for school officials to verify the facts about what happened).
- Shows of support, and positive, or encouraging comments.
- Communication regarding the location and procedures for reunifying with their children.
- Guidance on how to minimize crisis exposure.

Response (stabilizing an emergency once it has happened)

- Crisis intervention information.
- Information about school-based and community mental health resources.
- Specific details of the school's family reunification plan.
- School closure information.
- Crisis event updates and information.
- What the school/district is doing to provide crisis intervention resources.

Recovery (restoring the learning environment)

- Dates, times, and locations of face-to-face community informational gatherings.
- Updates on school reopening procedures and where to find community and school resources.
- Information about memorials and other school outreach efforts.

- Information about the school's recovery progress (e.g., news and photos).
- Strategies for positive coping.

Additional social media tips for parents and educators. Recognize the challenges schools face during crisis events. While trying to provide information and resources as quickly as possible, school administrators and crisis teams must balance the need for immediacy with accuracy and verification. If you are not a social media user, seek out information and resources through other methods (e.g., the school's webpage or more traditional paper-based memos). However, recognize that, increasingly, schools are finding social media to be an effective, quick, and inexpensive option for communicating with the community. Most critical is to use social media to convey the facts, dispel the rumors, and provide resources that facilitate healthy, adaptive coping.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

National Associate of School Psychologists (NASP) school safety and crisis response handouts - http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx

Chicago Public Schools Social Media Toolkit - http://www.cps.edu/pages/socialmediatoolkit.aspx

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