

GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND OTHER FORMS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Introduction

The aim of this document is to provide advice and guidance for those working with children and young people in educational settings (including volunteers) regarding the use of Social Networking Sites.

The document has been produced for Governing Bodies and Headteachers of all Schools in Lancashire and for Senior Managers and Management Committees within the County Council's centrally managed teaching services. The document has been the subject of consultation with the recognised Professional Associations and Trade Unions.

Background

The use of social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace is rapidly becoming the primary form of communication between friends and family. In addition there are many other sites which allow people to publish their own pictures, text and videos such as YouTube and blogging sites.

It would not be reasonable to expect or instruct employees not to use these sites which, if used with caution, should have no impact whatsoever on their role in school. Indeed, appropriate use of some sites may also have professional benefits.

It is naïve and outdated however to believe that use of such sites provides a completely private platform for personal communications. Even when utilised sensibly and with caution employees are vulnerable to their personal details being exposed to a wider audience than they might otherwise have intended. One example of this is when photographs and comments are published by others without the employees consent or knowledge which may portray the employee in a manner which is not conducive to their role in school.

Difficulties arise when staff utilise these sites and they do not have the knowledge or skills to ensure adequate security and privacy settings. In addition there are some cases when employees deliberately use these sites to communicate with and/or form inappropriate relationships with children and young people.

Specific Guidance

Employees who choose to make use of social networking site/media should be advised as follows:-

- That they familiarise themselves with the sites 'privacy settings' in order to ensure that information is not automatically shared with a wider audience than intended;

- That they do not conduct or portray themselves in a manner which may:-
 - bring the school into disrepute;
 - lead to valid parental complaints;
 - be deemed as derogatory towards the school and/or it's employees;
 - be deemed as derogatory towards pupils and/or parents and carers;
 - bring into question their appropriateness to work with children and young people.
- That they do not form on-line 'friendships' or enter into communication with *parents/carers and pupils as this could lead to professional relationships being compromised.
- On-line friendships and communication with former pupils should be strongly discouraged particularly if the pupils are under the age of 18 years.

(*In some cases employees in schools/services are related to parents/carers and/or pupils or may have formed on-line friendships with them prior to them becoming parents/carers and/or pupils of the school/service. In these cases employees should be advised that the nature of such relationships has changed and that they need to be aware of the risks of continuing with this method of contact. They should be advised that such contact is contradictory to the Specific Guidance points above)

Safeguarding Issues

Communicating with both current and former pupils via social networking sites or via other non-school related mechanisms such as personal e-mails and text messaging can lead to employees being vulnerable to serious allegations concerning the safeguarding of children and young people.

The Department for Education document 'Guidance for Safer Working Practices for Adults Working with Children and Young people in Educational Settings (March 2009) states:-

12. Communication with Pupils (*including the Use of Technology*)

In order to make best use of the many educational and social benefits of new technologies, pupils need opportunities to use and explore the digital world, using multiple devices from multiple locations. It is now recognised that that e.safety risks are posed more by behaviours and values than the technology itself. Adults working in this area must therefore ensure that they establish safe and responsible online behaviours. This means working to local and national guidelines on acceptable user policies. These detail the way in which new and emerging technologies may and may not be used and identify the sanctions for misuse. Learning Platforms are now widely established and clear agreement by all

This means that schools/services should:

- have in place an Acceptable Use policy (AUP)
- continually self-review e.safety policies in the light of new and emerging technologies
- have a communication policy which specifies acceptable and permissible modes of communication

This means that adults should:

parties about acceptable and responsible use is essential.

Communication between pupils and adults, by whatever method, should take place within clear and explicit professional boundaries. This includes the wider use of technology such as mobile phones text messaging, e-mails, digital cameras, videos, web-cams, websites and blogs. Adults should not share any personal information with a child or young person. They should not request, or respond to, any personal information from the child/young person, other than that which might be appropriate as part of their professional role. Adults should ensure that all communications are transparent and open to scrutiny.

Adults should also be circumspect in their communications with children so as to avoid any possible misinterpretation of their motives or any behaviour which could be construed as grooming. They should not give their personal contact details to pupils including e-mail, home or mobile telephone numbers, unless the need to do so is agreed with senior management and parents/carers. E-mail or text communications between an adult and a child young person outside agreed protocols may lead to disciplinary and/or criminal investigations. This also includes communications through internet based web sites.

Internal e-mail systems should only be used in accordance with the school/service's policy.

Further information can be obtained from <http://www.dfe.org.uk>

Recommendations

- (i) That this document is shared with all staff who come into contact with children and young people, that it is retained in Staff Handbooks and that it is specifically referred to when inducting new members of staff into your school/service.
- (ii) That appropriate links are made to this document with your school/services Acceptable Use Policy
- (iii) That employees are encouraged to consider any guidance issued by their professional association/trade union concerning the use of social networking sites
- (iv) That employees are informed that disciplinary action may be taken in relation to those members of staff who choose not to follow the Specific Guidance outlined above.

- ensure that personal social networking sites are set at private and pupils are never listed as approved contacts
- never use or access social networking sites of pupils.
- not give their personal contact details to pupils, including their mobile telephone number
- only use equipment e.g. mobile phones, provided by school/service to communicate with children, making sure that parents have given permission for this form of communication to be used
- only make contact with children for professional reasons and in accordance with any school/service policy
- recognise that text messaging should only be used as part of an agreed protocol and when other forms of communication are not possible
not use internet or web-based communication channels to send personal messages to a child/young person

