



28 February 2019

Internet Safety

Dear Parents,

Following my article about Safer Internet Day 2019 in the last Pitsford Post (Feb 15th 2019), I thought it might be a good time to write to you to remind you that internet safety is part of our on-going programme of PSHE at Pitsford School. In partnership with you, we want to do everything that we can to keep our children safe online, and even more importantly help them to become critical users of media in a digital age so that they can make good decisions about how they use the internet and what they should do if they see something that worries them.

We encourage our children to talk to an adult - to a parent or to a teacher - if they have concerns. And not to respond if they are contacted by someone that they do not know.

This is true whether it be a named or anonymous person or by an online phishing or scare campaign.

The media often highlights specific concerns, sometimes in ways that sensationalise. Certainly we have to be critical of what we read in social media. Following safeguarding guidance, most schools choose not to highlight specific scares and threats that have gone viral. We cannot keep on top of these, by next month there will be a new fad. Therefore our focus with children should be on critical thinking and digital resilience.

Chain letters that threaten bad luck or worse unless you send ten people a copy of the letter are not new: Online chain letters accelerate the spread of these messages while also enabling on-going back and forth communication from the sender by moving from letters to direct messaging. They also lower the effort required to take part, from printing, addressing and posting a letter to clicking a number to send a Whatsapp or text.

A recent post that has gone viral is that of a scary looking Japanese cartoon character, Momo. The story line is unpleasant and concerning, but Andy Phippe, Professor of Social Responsibility in IT at Plymouth University comments that such things as Momo "become social media storms because folk are so keen to share... But check the sources and the evidence trail soon runs dry. It's viral content at the end of the day, propagating just adds fuel to the fire, and creates unfounded hysteria. Don't believe everything you read online."

Alan Mackenzie of E-safetypro has specifically written to me asking me to inform any parents that are concerned to confirm that this is a hoax, but one that is spreading rapidly.

If you have concerns about things that you read in the media, and it is inevitable and understandable that you will, I urge you to go to a reputable online website to find the correct advice for parents and children: see our recent twitter feed for information about parentzone.org.uk – their trending section is very useful for getting the low down on the most recent information to hit the news. There is a search button in the top right hand corner and you can key in the name of the raised concern to get reliable information. Other useful links are:

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www.ceop.police.uk/safety_centre/

www.thinkyouknow.co.uk

Carmel Glassbrook, manager of Professionals Online Safety Helpline, says that the problem is "not the phenomenon itself but that professionals and parents were sharing Facebook posts about Momo without checking on its validity. It has become a viral topic, founded more on scaremongering headlines than well-researched facts."

She urges us to focus on ensuring the door is open for children to talk about these kinds of issues and teaching good practice rather than "telling them there's a big red button they mustn't push."

"Fostering an atmosphere of openness and transparency about online activity ensures that children can thrive. If you do notice them switching screens on their devices when approached or new numbers or email addresses on their devices it's worth checking in with them."

Rather than warning children about specific dangers we can better help children by teaching them good practices online and ensuring that they know that they should not be trying to contact strangers online, regardless of the method. Setting privacy systems on devices with your child is a great way to have this conversation and agree on automatic precautions.

Parentzone urges parents to follow their child's lead – introducing the idea of any new fad like the Momo Challenge may lead them to investigate, but regular discussion about whether they have seen anything online that has upset them is crucial.

As always if you have any concerns that your child is accessing material that is dangerous or if you are aware that something offensive or unpleasant is being shared amongst groups in school, please let us know.

I am sure that you also appreciate that while Momo is a hoax, it can be used maliciously and is also out there as a topic of conversation, children may well be discussing it. If it is something that is on their radar, reassure them that it is nothing more than an urban myth, and also be mindful that as ever we will be urging them to be kind to one another both online and offline.

Yours faithfully,

Fidelma Kirk
Safeguarding lead



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