

Bishop's Hatfield Girls' School

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Dear Parents and Carers,

We are writing to you as a result of recent concerning issues that the pastoral team have had to manage in relation to pupils' misuse of social media and group chats. Recently group chats in particular have proved problematic. Multiple pupils appear to be on the same call with each other and are struggling to speak respectfully to each other. Pupils are finding it difficult to regulate their emotions during these chats and they can become heated, resulting in disagreements which are then continued into school in the days following the chat. All of this is detracting from pupil's learning and adding to the workload of the pastoral team.

Due to this we feel it is timely to reiterate our commitment as a school to online safety and to ask for your support as parents and carers as we work in partnership to keep all our young people safe. As part of this commitment, we wish to draw your attention as parents and carers to the risks associated with the misuse of social media, including group chats, as well as the sharing of explicit images and videos. We also hope to provide guidance on how you can help keep your child safe online.

Recent observations by the pastoral and safeguarding teams have highlighted concerns over:

- **Inappropriate content:** pupils may knowingly or inadvertently access or share unsuitable material, including explicit images. The potential social and emotional impacts of this sort of material are obvious, but there are also legal implications. **Pupils who share indecent images of children or young people under the age of 18 are breaking the law. It is also important to point out that if a pupil has an indecent image of a child under 18 stored on their phone then they are also breaking the law. We would ask that as parents and carers you check your child's phone regularly in order to keep her and other children safe.**
- **Cyberbullying and Peer Pressure:** unfortunately group chats are increasingly becoming platforms for harmful interactions, at times resulting in arguments or disagreements that are then brought into school. These online disagreements are diverting pupils from their learning and result in our Head of Year and Safeguarding teams spending hours of their time on dealing with issues that have not occurred within school hours and relate to devices not provided by the school.

"Pupils flourish and support each other to succeed"

- **Privacy Risks:** pupils sharing personal details online which can put them at risk from online predators.
- **Impact on Mental Well-Being:** excessive or unsupervised social media use has been linked to anxiety, low self-esteem, and disrupted sleep patterns. We are increasingly seeing this in some of our younger pupils.

Suggestions for Keeping Your Child Safe Online

To support your child in navigating the digital world safely, we recommend the following:

- **Set Age-Appropriate Restrictions:** confirm that your child is only using apps and social media platforms appropriate for their age. **Many platforms require a minimum age of 13 or 14. Please double check this.** Just because your child is over the age limit does not mean that using that form of social media is a good idea.
- **Monitor Online Activity:** we advise that you regularly review your child's phone, group chats, and social media profiles. Discuss with them what they do online, and encourage them to speak to you if they have any issues or concerns.
- **Restrict your child's access:** we strongly recommend that you **remove your child's devices from them at a set time each evening and take them away until the morning.** Children do not need to have their phones at night and all evidence points to the fact that having phones late into the evening is damaging to their wellbeing and sleep. This is often the time when the most inappropriate behaviour takes place.
- **Use Parental Control Tools:** take advantage of built-in parental controls on devices and third-party software to restrict access to inappropriate content.
- **Educate on Privacy:** talk with your child about the importance of not sharing personal information (such as their full name, address, pictures of themselves or others, or school details) online in order to keep them safe.
- **Encourage Open Dialogue:** foster an environment where your child feels comfortable discussing any online interactions that make them uneasy.
- **Stay Informed:** familiarize yourself with our school's safeguarding and online safety policies available on our website (www.bishopatfield.herts.sch.uk/policies). These documents provide detailed advice on digital safety and our expectations of pupils' online behaviour.
- **Report any inappropriate behaviour and block accounts that are abusive.** If you or your child are subject to online abuse or harassment, we would encourage you to report it to Hertfordshire Constabulary <https://www.herts.police.uk/>. All social media apps also have their own reporting systems and we strongly encourage you to do this as this will help prevent further harmful content spreading.

We believe that a collaborative approach between school and home is absolutely key to ensuring our pupils can safely enjoy the benefits of digital technology while avoiding its pitfalls.

The Bishop's 360 demonstrates our commitment to developing the whole person. It sets out the journey we want our pupils to take - academically, socially, and personally. **This approach reinforces that every aspect of a child's development, including digital behaviour, is important.** We expect our pupils to reflect our core values of Respect, Honesty, Ambition, Teamwork, Trust, and Kindness both on and offline.

We do now need to make it clear that we as a school cannot ask our pastoral staff to investigate and manage pupil disagreements that have occurred online out of school hours. We would like to encourage parents and carers to think carefully about your child's social media usage and would encourage restrictions on the use of devices, including an agreement that all are put away at a reasonable hour each evening. We will be in touch in due course with a school initiative we are currently giving some thought to in relation to pupil's use of their mobile phones.

Thank you for your continued support in keeping our pupils safe.

Mr Wood
Headteacher

Mrs Mansfield
Deputy Headteacher

Mrs Jackson
Assistant Headteacher