Internet use and social networking media

If you see the letters "POS" on a computer screen your child is using, are you worried about what the conversation is about?

Maybe you should be, as it means 'parent over shoulder' and is a warning to the person with whom your child is communicating not to say anything inappropriate that they do not want their parents to read.

Ensuring that students use the internet appropriately and responsibly is essential to their safety and wellbeing. Parents are particularly well placed to encourage socially responsible use of social networking sites either on a laptop or PC or on their child's mobile phone. Parents can control their children's access by having parent controls set up on their computers and monitoring their usage. Mobile phones should also be carefully monitored.

Inappropriate and irresponsible use of social networking sites and other social networking media, causes a great deal of distress to students. Indeed, much of the bullying that the school is asked to deal with has its origins, or at least its continuation, through social networking media, including mobile phones. Cyber-bullying does not just occur between people that are 'friends' on a social networking site, and so it is not always easy for students to simply 'block the bully'. Some profiles on the social networking sites are specifically set up to cause distress to others, allowing the user to post (sometimes anonymously) unpleasant comments about people they know or even those they do not. If parents do not know about these sites or do not understand social networking, their children may be caught up in cyber-bullying without their parents' being aware.

Whilst social networking sites and other social media are very good for keeping in touch and for students to chat with their friends, to help prevent the issues caused by cyber-bullying their use by young people should be monitored and supervised by parents.   Parents have a key role to play in reporting incidents directly to the social networking site provider and for ensuring that their own child does not post inappropriate comments, take part in conversations that are unpleasant and ultimately to teach their child to remove themselves from the site or to log off completely before things get out of hand.

Some sites have an age limit before the students can become members. For example, young people have to be 13 years old before they can join Facebook – this means that no one in Year 7 should be accessing Facebook and few in Year 8. It is important that parents ensure that that their Year 7 and Year 8 children are not accessing these sites as there are good reasons why some sites are not suitable for younger children.

Many parents tell us that their children often know more about computers and the internet than they do and that it is difficult to keep an eye on what they are doing, even when the computer or laptop is being used in a busy family room. To help redress the balance, we have also posted on our website a handy sheet of 'text speak' for parents to get to grips with – including variations of "POS" – a Vodaphone leaflet designed for parents and a CEOP letter.