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The challenge of social media and schools

Use of Social Media by Parents

Social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) has had widespread impact on the way in which we communicate and express our thoughts and opinions. There are clearly many benefits for us both as individuals and also as communities, and as a school we are exploring how we might best harness the power of social media to engage even more closely with parents and pupils.

Unfortunately we are also experiencing an increasing number of situations where social media has been the vehicle for inappropriate behaviour by parents.

We live in a society where we are proud of our right to freedom of speech and would not wish to suggest that this should be curtailed in any way. There are occasions however, when things said in the virtual world are at best unhelpful and, at worst, may constitute harassment, bullying or intimidation which could ultimately lead to Police involvement.

Social media as a forum for parents' views

Our staff at Bro Ogwr work tremendously hard to provide the very best education for our pupils and always want to work in partnership with parents and the wider community. It also needs to be recognised that all extra-curricular activities provided to enhance opportunities are voluntary with staff giving their own time and effort.

However, we recognise that there will be occasions where, for whatever reason, parents may not agree with a particular course of action or may have specific concerns.

It is entirely natural to discuss school life and express our thoughts and opinions with others face to face or on the phone. Some of these conversations are now also being aired on social media and the person posting has little control over who might ultimately see it.

Sadly, some of these comments and observations could cause (and, in recent cases, have caused) offence if aired in the public domain and may in some cases be intimidating or even slanderous. This is not to suggest that we do not welcome feedback and ideas for improvement and we hope that you recognise our recent efforts to ensure that communication is timely and helpful.

Feedback is always best when it is constructive and reasonable and is focused on finding an acceptable solution. When difficult things need to be said, it is usually best to do so face-to-face, or at least in some form of private communication, such as an e-mail or letter. Some recent examples of ill-considered use of social media have caused school staff to spend a disproportionate amount of time trying to manage issues and situations and a great deal of upset. We would much prefer if this time and effort could be focused on the education of our children. Indeed, we are looking at establishing a Parent Forum in future to ensure that this communication continues in a positive and structured way, to the benefit of all.

Common questions

If the site I post comments on is 'private' then why should I worry what I say, as only my 'friends' can read it?

Once a comment has been posted there is nothing to stop other users forwarding or sharing it. What started as an initial 'sounding off' can quickly spread much more widely and cause a lot of unintended hurt.

How could the Police get involved?

If postings are considered to be threatening or discriminatory then the Police may become involved and have the authority to seize mobile devices and contact service providers.

How can parents help?

- If you are posting on social media and it relates to the school, pupils or other parents, please check your facts, be considerate in the way in which you express things and avoid language that others might consider to be abusive, aggressive or threatening.
- Do not refer to individual pupils or staff on social media.
- If you have a significant concern about an aspect of school life, please talk to someone at the school before posting on social media. The correct procedure for doing this is by speaking to your child's class teacher in the first instance.
- If you have a specific complaint which has not been resolved at the informal stage, please follow the school's Complaints Policy which is available on the school website.

In Conclusion

It is disappointing to have to send out this letter and we fully appreciate that the vast majority of parents and carers at Bro Ogwr use social media in relation to school matters responsibly and in a helpful manner. We have no wish to stifle debate or discourage parents expressing their views, but want to encourage and promote positive role models in both the digital world as well as the real world. It is the partnership of schools and parents that can help educate pupils to use social media safely, responsibly and considerately.

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Chair of Governors