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A University of Kent Academies Trust School

Dear Parent/Carer,

Digital safety

As part of our ongoing commitment to supporting your child's education and overall development, we believe it is essential to regularly communicate with parents/carers to address the challenges and opportunities posed by the ever-expanding world of mobile devices and online platforms. We want to empower you with information and resources to help your child navigate the digital landscape safely and responsibly.

In this digital age, mobile devices and online platforms play a significant role in your child's life. They offer incredible benefits, such as access to educational resources, communication with friends and family, and entertainment. However, along with these advantages come potential risks that we must be aware of and manage together.

To assist you in this endeavour, we have collaborated with the National College and National Online Safety to provide you with valuable resources and information on online safety. Our goal is to ensure that you, as parents/carers, can make informed decisions about how best to support your child in using their device safely and responsibly. Please find below the link to National Online Safety if you would like to find out more about any other topics around online safety for your child, then please enrol on the platform as a parent/carer using the link below, you will then have free access to webinars, courses and guides about existing platforms and new platforms as they are introduced.

<https://nationalonlinesafety.com/enrol/chatham-grammar>

In this letter I wanted to highlight how we work with students to ensure they are kind online. We regularly remind and encourage all students to be sensitive, positive and respectful online, students can send evidence of a kind message or act online to bekindonline@universityofkentacademiestrust.org.uk to receive leadership points as a reward.

We frequently share with students the need to perceive messages and communications online, especially on social media and in group chats, from the perspective of the person receiving them. We also explain what constitutes a post being potentially classed as online bullying and that these types of messages online can impact another persons' self-esteem, confidence and social skills.

If a student feels that any online communication is not kind or appropriate, it is important to report it to a trusted adult. Students are encouraged to speak with their PT in the first instance, we also have pastoral support available to help. If students would prefer to report via email, they can use refernow@universityofkentacademiestrust.org.uk

Please find attached a guide to help support your child with the use of group chats. This guide, plus many more can also be located on our academy website <https://www.chathamgrammar.org.uk/esafety>

I am aware that Ms Perkin will also be writing to update you on our monitoring systems. Thank you for your partnership in ensuring a safe and enriching digital experience for your child. Together, we can empower them to make responsible choices in this ever-evolving digital world.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Sanger
E-Safety Lead



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What Parents & Carers Need to Know about

GROUP CHATS

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WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Occurring through messaging apps, on social media and in online games, group chats are among the most popular ways that young people engage with their peers online. Involving, by definition, three or more individuals, these groups allow users to send messages, images and videos to everyone in one place. While they are useful for helping friends, people with shared interests or members of a club to communicate and coordinate activities, they can also leave young people feeling excluded and bullied – as well as providing opportunities for inappropriate content to be shared and viewed.

BULLYING

Unkind comments or images which are purposely aimed at an individual can be shared freely in a group chat – allowing and often encouraging others to join in the bullying behaviour. If this content is shared in a group of their peers (especially a larger group), it serves to amplify the hurt, embarrassment, anxiety and isolation that the victim feels.

EXCLUSION AND ISOLATION

This common issue with group chats can happen in several ways: starting a new group, for instance, but deliberately excluding a certain child. Likewise, the chat may take place on an app which one child doesn't have access to, meaning they can't be involved. A child can also feel isolated when a group chat is used to discuss or share images from an event that everyone else but them attended.

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

Some discussions in group chats may include inappropriate words, swearing and unsuitable images or videos. These could be viewed by your child if they are part of that group, whether they actively engage in it or not. Some chat apps have a disappearing message function, so your child may be unable to report something they've seen because it can only be viewed once or for a short time.

SHARING GROUP CONTENT

It's important to remember that – while the content of the chat is private between those in the group – individual users can easily share a message, photo or video with others outside of the group or screenshot what's been posted. The risk of something your child intended as private becoming public (and potentially going viral) is higher if there are people they don't know well in the group.

UNKNOWN MEMBERS

Within larger group chats, it's more likely your child will be communicating with people they don't really know. These strangers may be friends of the host, but not necessarily friendly toward your child. It's wise for young people not to share personal details and stay aware that they have no control over the messages and images they share after they've put them online.

NOTIFICATIONS AND FOMO

A drawback of large group chats is the sheer number of notifications. Every time someone in the group messages, your child's device will be 'pinged' with an alert; potentially, this could mean hundreds of notifications a day. Not only is this highly distracting, but young people's fear of missing out on the latest conversation results in increased screen time as they try to keep up with the chat.

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Advice for Parents & Carers

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CONSIDER OTHERS' FEELINGS

Group chats are often an arena for young people to gain social status. This could cause them to do or say things on impulse, which could upset others in the group. Encourage your child to consider how other people might feel if they engaged in this behaviour. If your child does upset a member of their group chat, support them to reach out, show empathy and apologise for their mistake.

GIVE SUPPORT, NOT JUDGEMENT

Remind your child that they can confide in you if they feel bullied or excluded in a group chat, instead of responding to the person who's upset them. Validate their hurt feelings and help to put them back in control by discussing how they'd like to handle the situation. On a related note, you could also empower your child to speak up if they're in a chat where others are being picked on.

BLOCK, REPORT AND LEAVE

If your child is in a chat where inappropriate content is being shared, advise them to block the users sending the material, report them to the host app or platform and exit the group. If any of this content could be putting a minor at risk, contact the police. Emphasise to your child that it's OK for them to simply leave any group chat that they don't feel comfortable being a part of.

PRACTISE SAFE SHARING

In any online communication, it's vital for young people to be aware of what they're sharing and who might potentially see it. Discuss the importance of not revealing identifiable details like their address, their school or photos that they wouldn't like to be seen widely. Remind them that once something is shared in a group, they lose control of where it may end up and how it might be used.

AVOID INVITING STRANGERS

Sadly, many individuals online hide their true identity to gain a child's trust – for example, to gather information on them, to exchange inappropriate content or to coax them into doing things they aren't comfortable with. Ensure your child understands why they shouldn't add people they don't know to a group chat – and, especially, to never accept a group chat invitation from a stranger.

SILENCE NOTIFICATIONS

Having a phone or tablet bombarded with notifications from a group chat can be a massive irritation and distraction – especially if it's happening late in the evening. Explain to your child that they can still be part of the group chat, but that it would be healthier for them to turn off or mute the notifications and catch up with the conversation at a time which better suits them.

Meet Our Expert

Dr Claire Sutherland is an online safety consultant, educator and researcher who has developed and implemented anti-bullying and cyber safety policies for schools. She has written various academic papers and carried out research for the Australian government comparing internet use and sexting behaviour of young people in the UK, USA and Australia.



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