Using social media safely

With the growing number of social media sites, it is no surprise that social media is the most common form of communication for children and teenagers. Posts, status updates, comments, instant messages, video uploads, tweets and texts have become a regular part of their lives. While there are many positive benefits to using social media, including staying connected with friends and expressing your interests, students must be cautious in their use of these networks.

Among the most popular social media platforms used are Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube and Whatsapp Messenger. Many of these platforms are free and are available on smartphones and other electronic devices. These platforms are easy to navigate and often allow information to be shared instantly, not only with friends, but with strangers. On social media, it is important to remember that the world is watching.

Here are some tips, provided by the Canadian Safe School Network and GetSafeOnline.org, to keep your children safe and help them make smart choices when using social media:
- Set some boundaries for your child before they get their first 'connected device' (mobile, tablet, laptop or games console). Once they have it, it can be more difficult to change the way they use it or the settings.
- Have a conversation about what is appropriate online behaviour and what actions could have huge repercussions that could damage their reputation and be harmful to others.
- Talk to your child about the kind of websites they look at. Encourage them to speak to you if they come across something they find worrying or upsetting on websites, games or social media.
- Discuss with your child what is safe and appropriate to post and share online. Written comments, photos and videos all form part of their 'digital footprint' and could be seen by anyone and available on the internet forever, even if it is subsequently deleted.
- Explain to your child that being online doesn't give them anonymity or protection, and that they shouldn't do anything online that they wouldn't do face-to-face. Users should only accept people they know in order to protect themselves from spammers, strangers and others who may be using social networking sites to commit crimes.
- Unlike when they're meeting someone face-to-face, children don't always know who they're actually 'talking' to online, even if they think they do. Tell your children they must never email, chat, or text with strangers, and it's never okay to meet a stranger in the real world.
- Ensure your children set their privacy settings appropriately. Take the time to learn how privacy settings work on your children's favourite sites, and teach them how to control their privacy.
- Tell your children never to share personal and private information with anyone online. This includes, but is not limited to, his or her full name, age, birth date, address, phone number, social insurance number, credit card information and parents' full names.
- Limit the amount of time that your children spend on social media platforms and talk about the importance of healthy and appropriate use of technology.