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TITLE: SOCIAL NETWORKING POLICY E-SAFETY

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Contents

Social software' provides new opportunities for personal expression, the creation of communities, collaboration and sharing. Examples include [blogs](#) (personal web-based journals), moblogs (blogs sent from a mobile phone), wikis (modifiable collaborative web pages), podcasting (subscription-based broadcast over the web), and social networking sites. They enhance or gain value from social interactions and behaviour, and can provide opportunities for collective intelligence, so adding value to data and concepts. Developments in digital video, photography and music technologies have made the process of content creation and distribution much easier, meaning that social software is widely used for both business and leisure activities alike.

Social networking sites, such as [MySpace](#), [Facebook](#), [Bebo](#) and [Piczo](#) are hugely popular at present, with [research from Ofcom](#) showing that just over one fifth (22 per cent) of adult internet users aged 16+ and almost half (49 per cent) of children aged 8-17 who use the internet have set up their own profile on a social networking site. For adults, the likelihood of setting up a profile is highest among 16-24 year olds (54 per cent) and decreases with age. The research shows that social networking is very popular with younger users, but also reveals that some are by-passing age restrictions to set up profiles. For example, although the minimum age for most major social networking sites is typically 13 (14 on MySpace), 27 per cent of 8-11 year olds who are aware of social networking say that they have a profile on a site.

The issues and risks

Social networking sites can present some risks if not used in a safe and responsible way. As with most new technologies, key issues centre around content and contact risks.

One of the key benefits of social networking sites are that they encourage young people to be creative users of the internet, publishing content rather than being passive consumers. They can express themselves with an online personality, use all the applications the site has to offer, chat and socialize with peers, and share multimedia content such as music, photos and video clips with others.

However, there are concerns that young people may upload content that is inappropriate, offensive or even illegal to their online spaces, posting material that could damage their reputations or the reputations of others. Equally they may post inappropriate comments to the profiles of others, which can result in the bullying, slander or humiliation of others.

Another key area of concern is the permanency of content posted online – once published online a photo or video clip can be freely copied and circulated and will potentially exist forever.

Many young people maintain very detailed online profiles, including a large amount of personal information, photos and accounts of daily routines which could lead to them being identified or contacted in person. The contact risks of other forms of new technology are well documented, and those that seek to harm or exploit children and young people will use social networking sites as another way to contact and groom potential victims.

Most social networking sites do contain privacy settings, allowing a profile to be set to private and only viewed by approved contacts, but these are not always used. Indeed, one of the big attractions of social networking sites is the large numbers of 'virtual' friends that can be linked from a profile, but this can expose children and young people to the risks of unwelcome contact.

A further risk includes the amount of time that children and young people may spend on social networking sites to the detriment of relationships with family, friends and peers in the real world.

Minimising risks

So what can educators and parents do to minimise the risks posed by social networking? Clearly banning activity of any sort merely heightens the desire of young people to give it a try and push the boundaries. So it is really a question of ensuring that you know what children are up to by talking to them about their online activity and educating them to the possible downsides - encouraging safe use and enjoying the benefits, while being aware of the impact of their actions online and the possible risks and dangers, both in the short and long term. For example, you might want to discuss with young people how photographs can be manipulated, how the content can attract the wrong sort of attention, and how the photo might be viewed in years to come.

Good principles for minimising risks include:

- establishing with young people the sites they can sign up to
- establishing the minimum ages that sites will accept – generally over 14; 16 or 18+ - and abiding by these restrictions
- discussing the importance of privacy online, and encouraging young people to make use of privacy settings. A good principle is to only allowing access to friends known in the 'real world'
- regularly reviewing young people's online profiles along with them
- maintaining an ongoing dialogue about the issues, encouraging young people to seek help if they experience any problems online.

You might also want to consider:

- Does the social networking site provide information for parents and/or educators?
- Does the site provide safety tips, and links to good advice and sources of support?
- Are their mechanisms for parents or carers to amend or take down their children's profiles?

- Is the site moderated?
- Is the site based in the UK or overseas? Overseas sites may have different attitudes to the content they allow on their servers.

SETA's facilities and time are not be used for social networking and accessing sites.

A further key issue for us is user education –it is likely that children and young people will access social networking sites from other locations. As such, we have a duty to educate them as to the safe and responsible behaviours to adopt when using social networking services and other forms of new technologies as part of their general digital literacy education.

Many social networking sites are now taking a positive approach to minimising the risks, ensuring that they have safety guidelines and codes of practice in place, and responding promptly to requests to remove content. Additionally, the first UK Social Networking Guidance was published in April 2008. Developed by a taskforce of representatives from industry, charity and law enforcement agencies including [Vodafone](#), the [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre \(CEOP\)](#) and the [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#), the guidance provides advice for industry, parents and children about how to stay safe online. The document '[Good practice guidance for the providers of social networking and other user interactive services 2008](#)' is available to download from the Home Office website.

Other useful sources of information and advice on social networking include:

[Childnet International – Blogsafety](#)

Childnet International is a non-profit organisation working with others to 'help make the internet a great and safe place for children'. Their blogsafety website provides a range of information on blogging and social networking for young people, parents, educators and industry. A downloadable leaflet for parents and carers is also available, outlining the key issues and suggesting '5 Ps for personal safety' when using social networking sites – a

positive outlook, privacy settings, appropriate photos and postings, and the role of the police in supporting social networkers who experience problems online.

ConnectSafely – Top 10 safety tips for video-sharing

ConnectSafely is an online forum for teens, parents and experts, which focuses on safe socializing on the fixed and mobile web. This resource reminds social networkers how to use video on their profiles safely. Tips include making sure the background doesn't reveal too much information about your location, respecting others' privacy, respecting others' copyright, and generally being a 'good citizen' when online.

Ofcom – Social Networking: A quantitative and qualitative research report into attitudes, behaviours and use

This Ofcom research document, published in April 2008, aims to 'provide evidence-based insights into the social networking phenomenon which can be used to inform current understanding of usage and behaviour in the UK, and to help identify some of the current and potential future issues around people's use of social networking sites'. It provides a useful overview of the technologies, insights into how people use and engage with social networking sites, and a summary of the key privacy and safety concerns.