

ST BENEDICT'S CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

incorporating

WEST CUMBRIA CATHOLIC SIXTH FORM CENTRE

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Dear Parents & Carers,

Online Safety: Social Media Influencers

I am writing to you to make you aware of a growing concern. Some of our pupils' views and opinions appear to be being shaped by online social media influencers.

There are several adults who are trying to build online platforms to become 'celebrities' in the online world. These people are portraying themselves as highly successful individuals and have very smart looking professional websites. They are very vocal about a variety of issues on social media sites such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitch and YouTube to name but a few.

Opinions given on these platforms are often very strong and are targeted at influencing debate and mindsets of young people. Examples include views around misogyny, health, body image, and lifestyle choices.

One example that school would like you to be aware of is the online personality of Andrew Tate. A small number of our pupils have included in their work strong quotes and opinions from Andrew Tate's website/social media content. Some of the opinions portrayed on his online presence cover the topics above.

We want all our pupils to understand the merits of free speech but also understand that just because something has been posted online doesn't make it appropriate or factual. Especially when shared views depict topics such as misogyny.

I am attaching to this document three parents/carers guides to social media influencers, which will hopefully be helpful in conversations with your child.

Yours faithfully

C. Redhead
Assistant Headteacher

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Social media influencers are people who have established credibility in a specific industry and have the power to influence other people's decisions. Most commonly associated with YouTube and Instagram, 'influencers' will usually have a large number of followers and be viewed as authentic by their audience. It is for this reason that many influencers are often paid by big companies to promote their products in the hope of persuading their followers to purchase those goods.

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What parents need to know about SOCIAL PRESSURES LINKED TO 'INFLUENCERS'



AN UNREALISTIC PERCEPTION OF BODY IMAGE

Some of the most popular social media influencers often depict themselves as having the 'perfect body' and are paid to promote items such as health supplements or swimwear, which young people believe can help them achieve the same look. What is not always realised is that these images can be edited or filtered and aren't always a true-life representation. Your child may feel like this is what they need to look like and in some cases, become obsessed with their body image, which could contribute towards a lower self-esteem or even becoming depressed if they can't achieve the same look.



ENCOURAGING BAD HABITS

Although many social media influencers will get paid to advertise brands and their products, they will also post their own material online too, usually depicting their daily life or an activity for example. This may have both desirable and undesirable consequences, with influencers able to inspire both good habits, such as healthy eating, exercise or kindness. However it may also encourage children to adopt bad habits, such as drinking, smoking, swearing or even criminal behaviour, particularly if these are seen to be endorsed by the influencer.



AUTHENTICITY OF ENDORSEMENTS

Social media influencers hold a lot of persuasion with their audience and are often looked up to by younger followers. Many children will see them as credible, authentic and trust what they see online. However, some influencers may not always believe in the product they are promoting and therefore can mislead their followers, abusing their level of confidence in them. Your child may therefore find themselves looking up to people who are disingenuous or who feign interest in activities that they themselves do not actually care about.



BECOMING UNREALISTIC ROLE MODELS

As children become more and more involved on social media and identify who their favourite people are to follow, they may come to see social media influencers as role models, particularly if they are attracted by the lifestyle they see online. This could lead them into developing potentially unrealistic expectations of life and in some cases, using their role models as an escape from reality, particularly if they feel like they're own life isn't very fulfilling.



THE NEED TO HAVE EVERYTHING

Many social media influencers will take photos or videos of themselves wearing the latest fashion or jewellery which companies want them to promote. They may also be provided with the latest gadgets to promote or, if they are children, toys to play with in order to persuade their followers to purchase them. Many children will be keen to buy these items in order to keep up with the latest trends however if they get left behind, they could be made to feel inadequate or inferior by other children who do have them.



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Safety Tips For Parents



FOLLOW WHO THEY FOLLOW

A good way to see first-hand who may be influencing your child is to create your own social media account and follow the same people they do. This will give you a strong indication of what is shaping how your child behaves, what they like and what they are taking an interest in.



TALK ABOUT ROLE MODELS

Role models can play an important part of your child's life, particularly outside of the home. Talk to your child about who they look up to and why. Remind them that not everybody online is who they seem to be and if you do have concerns that your child is being negatively influenced, work with them in finding more positive alternatives.

BUILD THEIR SELF-ESTEEM

It's important that your child is aware of how unrealistic perceptions of life can be depicted on social media and that it is easy to be deceived. Discuss with your child how images can be heavily edited, cropped or manipulated to create artificial scenarios and that often the lifestyle that people display on social media isn't always realistic or in fact the truth.



DISCUSS REALISTIC VS UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

If you notice your child has suddenly taken a strong interest in the way they look, or you find they are a lot more body conscious, then it's a good idea to speak to them about why they feel that way. If they seem unhappy, try to build their self-esteem by talking to them and listening to their concerns, helping to build their confidence through praise and positivity. Remind them that looks aren't everything and not everything they see online is actually a true depiction of real life.



ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENT THINKING

Social media influencers can be quite powerful individuals who hold a lot of persuasive power so it's important to encourage your child to think independently about everything they see and engage with online. Talk to them about the dangers of blindly following others and in keeping an open mind when viewing content. Teach them to always question people's motives online, especially when they see individuals are promoting a brand or product which they are likely to have been paid to advertise but may not necessarily personally endorse.



Meet our expert

Pete Badh is a writer with over 10+ years in research and analysis. Working within a specialist area for West Yorkshire Police, Pete has contributed work which has been pivotal in successfully winning high profile cases in court as well as writing as a subject matter expert for industry handbooks.



What you need to know about...

LIFESTYLE SITES



What are they?

Lifestyle Sites

'Lifestyle sites' is a bit of a catch all term... because, unfortunately, much of the internet is built to take advantage of human psychological weakness. Essentially, lifestyle sites are websites, apps and social media platforms that use a variety of techniques to keep people hooked in and to sell products. They can also be sites which are set up by online communities experiencing issues around topics such as physical and mental health, but which are unregulated, unreliable and often lack support.

Know the Risks

Click bait and fake news

The internet economy is extremely competitive. Due to this, sites are getting increasingly desperate for attention and have learned that pushing hyperbolic, exaggerated, or made-up news is a way of drawing clicks and enticing users in.

Psychological tricks

App and website designers are clever and have learned how to use our brains' weak spots against us. A like on social media gives us a dopamine hit, apps hammer us with notifications to keep our attention, websites scroll forever, and even typefaces can make a difference. They're deliberately addictive and can be damaging.

Damage self-esteem

Social media can be especially damaging. Instagram, a site designed for beautiful photography, is awash with flattering (and often heavily filtered) selfies that can impact on children's self-worth or opinion of themselves and provide them with an unrealistic view of the world.

Unregulated advice

Websites which are set up by users with the intention of providing an online community sharing similar experiences can shape and influence children's thoughts and behaviour. As these are often unregulated, they could receive advice which is unhelpful, thoughtless or even dangerous.

Negative Effects

Increased time online

It's tricky to define an unhealthy amount of time to spend online as the internet has become a huge part of socialising now for adults and children. However, if you have noticed your child's internet use going up, then it may be time to step in and discuss their usage habits.

Interest in Fringe theories

Be on the lookout for behavioural changes in your child following too much time spent online. Children can be easily targeted and influenced by other people's opinions. They could be impacted on their own mental health and wellbeing by encountering fringe theories, rejection from social sources of support or cyberbullying.

Body image issues

Some children who use the likes of Instagram and TikTok may develop body image issues, by comparing themselves to the heavily filtered people posting selfies. Be on the lookout for tell-tale signs such as being overly concerned about how they look, wanting to cover up body parts, avoiding PE, and refusing to eat certain types of food.

Safety Tips

Talk about the risks

Like with much of internet safety, the first step involves talking directly with children about the risks of the internet. Explain the financial incentives for sites to be unhelpful and push products for financial gain. Advise them to only listen to official advice and beware of what is published online.

Teach critical thinking

Remind children that the content they see on social media can be flatteringly edited and is often unrepresentative of real life. Teach them to be critical and remember that much of what they see and read online is only an snapshot and isn't always true.

Limits and settings

Try to encourage children to take up other activities and spend less time online. You can also set time limits on usage either under your own supervision, or with the help of parental control software that limits hours that certain sites can be accessed.

Our Expert

Alan Martin



Alan Martin is a highly respected technology journalist and former acting editor who has written for a number of major publications including Wired, TechRadar, Stuff, PC Pro, Gizmodo and CNET. He has also contributed work to Business Insider and MSN and created content for tech giants Microsoft, Currys, LG and OnePlus.



What you need to know about... GAMING STREAMERS & INFLUENCERS



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What are they?

'Gaming Streamers & Influencers'

Streamers are people who stream themselves gaming, drawing, making things etc. for people to watch on the internet. Usually this will be done live, and others are able to chat with them in real time while they do so. Influencers are social media stars who hold influence over the people that follow them, like a kind of trend-setter or taste-maker, who companies often pay to promote their products. A streamer could also be considered an influencer in their chosen area.

Know the Risks

Adult Content

Many streamers use platforms such as Twitch or YouTube to broadcast themselves. YouTube for example, is only for ages 13+ (YouTube kids is for under 13s) and may contain a lot of other adult content. Streamers themselves, may be unsuitable for younger audiences with the kind of content they make, and with many opting to stream live, anything can – and does – happen.

Authenticity Risk

A lot of streamers will have some kind of sponsorship deal in place with a company trying to sell their products to an audience. When the audience is mostly younger viewers, they may not realise that streamers are getting paid to promote a product and may not necessarily have their best interests in mind.

Bullying and hate

While some streamers do employ moderators to try and combat hateful comments or bullying in their comments sections, they can still be very hectic. Hateful language is quite common, and people looking to groom children or engage in online bullying behaviour, could frequent the live chats.

Subscriptions

Streamers also make money through subscriptions on websites like Twitch, where fans will donate them a small amount as little as often as they like. Called 'bits', they can be bought in bundles of varying prices which can be gifted to streamers via 'cheers'. Children could buy these 'bits' in large amounts without realising what they're doing, leaving a big bill behind.

Safety Tips

Discuss what's real online

Be sure to teach kids the difference between what's real and honest, or fake and untrustworthy online. Photoshopping fake images and videos and bragging about themselves online is unfortunately quite commonplace so it is difficult to tell what is real or fake. People with large followings can be promoting unhealthy or unattainable lifestyles to children to boost their own online influence.

Use filters

There are filters that can be put in place to block out a lot of adult content on streaming sites. Just make sure you have access to children's accounts so you can set the parameters and keep track of what they're seeing yourself. Usually, parental controls will be located in the settings portion of an account's menu.

Check age settings

Both YouTube and Twitch state that they are not suitable for children under 13 years old, but other sites might be different. YouTube Kids, for example, is for ages 13 and under, and offers much of the same kid-friendly content that YouTube does without the risk of running into something improper.

Affiliate links

Keep an eye out for affiliate links in social media posts and tags like #ad. UK influencers have to follow the CAP Code for advertising standards, but many don't. It can be hard to tell who is working through legitimate channels because it's almost impossible to regulate. Many streamers encourage fans to buy merchandise through online shops and stores.

JADAGAMING

LIVE

Action & Support

Name check streamers

If your child has begun showing an interest in a streamer or influencer, check their names on Google. Some popular streamers have been discovered flouting industry regulations and using their young audiences to enhance their personal wealth through scams whilst others may swear on streams or promote drinking, substance abuse or links to gambling sites they operate to their young audiences.

Talk to our child

Initiate an open dialogue with your child about the kind of content they're consuming online. Ask about their favourite streamers and whether they like their personalities or the games they play and the community they have. Also remind them about what they should and shouldn't be sharing about themselves online and that just because social media stars do it, it can also be damaging.

Block and report

If you suspect a streamer might be taking advantage of their audience, or worse grooming children in anyway, and have irrefutable evidence, do not hesitate to block and report them. First, block your child from being able to view their content and alert other parents to your concerns. Go immediately to the police or local authorities with the evidence of what you've seen.

Our Expert Mark Foster



Mark Foster has worked in the gaming industry for 5 years as a writer, editor and presenter. He is the current gaming editor of two of the biggest gaming news sites in the world, UNILAD Gaming and GAMINGbible. Starting gaming from a young age with his siblings, he has a passion for understanding how games and tech work, but more importantly, how to make them safe and fun.