

What do you know about New Communication technologies?

Our editor, Dr Bláithín Gallagher explores this issue with Dr Maureen Griffin, B.A. M.A. Ph.D, Forensic Psychologist, Director Internet Safety for Schools Ireland

THE ADVENT OF THE smart phone and its widespread availability and use, means that many people, both young and old, now have immediate access to a device that incorporates not only a phone to call and text, a camera for both still and video images, but also access to the internet where one can watch a myriad of videos, films and even TV. It is in fact a portable computer. One can call via the internet all over the world using for example, Skype or Viber, and engage, both visually as well as via voice, with one or more people. This offers great opportunities in allowing families to keep in touch, particularly in these times of emigration, where grandparents can now keep in contact with grandchildren growing up on another continent. While there are great advantages with such technologies we must also be aware of the possible dangers that can accompany such easy access to these new communication technologies.

Social networking sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Club Penguin*, etc, allow users to become part of a virtual community. Members of this community will have individual profiles, 'friends' and make status posts about their everyday activities. Your profile is the place where you tell the world about yourself, as little or as much as you want to share, everything from your age and gender and your relationship status to your favourite movie or book. And of course your 'friends' in this social network are those people who you agree to connect with via your profile page. Today such social networks have become centre stage in many people's lives as they can update and monitor their network via the smart phone. Facebook has almost 1 billion members.

As the numbers of 'friends' a young person has on Facebook is seen as a status symbol, many openly admit to accepting 'friends' online that they do not know in real life. As part of Dr Griffin's workshops with students she challenges the participants use of this technology by drawing parallels with real life. What would you do if someone your own age approached you on the street and said "will you be my friend, can I have pictures of you, your e-mail address, a list of your friends, details of your interests etc." Would you give this person a folder containing all your personal information. The typical response is "No, I'd walk away". However, when accepting a friend on Facebook or any other social networking site, that is exactly what you are doing — giving away a huge folder of information to your new found 'friend'. She goes on to say that while we are very good at

educating our children about potential dangers in real life (e.g. what to do if a stranger asks you to get into their car), children often lack such safeguards when they are online. It is therefore imperative that we talk about the 'friends' accepted online — do you really know them? Are you really happy sharing personal information with them? The ISPC's National Children's Consultation Report showed that over 2,000 (16%) of the secondary school aged children surveyed had met up with someone from online. From visiting schools across Ireland students have shared similar stories, admitting to meeting 'friends' they only know online. While these 'friends' may be genuine, the anonymity of the Internet enables individuals to represent themselves online in whatever manner they choose. Therefore, we need to be aware of such online activity and in particular about any arranged meetings in which our children may be engaging.

Furthermore, Dr Griffin states that recent research, together with her personal experience, reveals that many users, in particular younger users, are unaware of their privacy setting and indeed the permanency of their data online. Young people are increasingly distanced from the consequences and impact of their online behaviour. Dr Griffin goes on to say "Neurologically children/adolescents are not as developed as adults. Their pre-frontal context which is responsible for planning, impulse control, concentration etc. is still maturing. As a result, children often post information online without thinking of the potential consequences. In order to challenge the 'distance' that technology creates, it is imperative that we draw parallels between

what they do online and what they do in real life". One of the exercises suggested by Dr Griffin is to get users thinking if they would be happy handing a 'print out' of one of their pictures on Facebook to a friend. Such an exercise will highlight the actual physicality of the information they are posting online. Why don't you print out your personal profiles, including pictures, post it on the wall at home or school or somewhere else public and see the reaction? Such an exercise may encourage a revision and a rethink to what is posted online.

Everyone should examine their Facebook privacy settings which control who can see your personal information, send you messages, post on your wall, tag (put your name against) your pictures etc. Remember once you post something online, you lose control of that information. It may be copied, printed out or passed on. You should be aware that Facebook holds a record of all online activity (including private chats) which can be downloaded with the click of a button. It is therefore vital that you keep your account passwords private to avoid the risk of this information getting into the wrong hands. It is very important to be aware that you do not know who really is accessing your online posts. There are threats online not only from strangers/predators but also from burglars, who use Facebook to understand people whereabouts. In fact, if there is a post on Facebook that you are heading away on holidays (as so many children and adults do) and your house is burgled, there are a number of insurance companies in Ireland that will not pay out as you have advertised the fact that you will be away. It is also worth remembering that an increasing number of potential employers are also accessing people's online profiles and using this information to influence their decision in hiring. This is a particularly important concern for students in leaving certificate who plan on entering the work force after school.

The best parental control is parental involvement. Dr Griffin advises that banning your child from Facebook or forcing them to be 'friends' with you online can lead to unintended consequences. Students from across Ireland have admitted setting up Facebook accounts even though their parents have forbidden it. Moreover, some students who are forced to be friends with parents have admitted to having two Facebook accounts — one in which they are friends with their parents and do not regularly access and one that their parents are unaware of. Dr Griffin has also found that some young people who have accepted their parents as friends have limited the amount the information the parent can see by customising their setting or adding the parent to a restricted friend list.

Dr Griffin informs us that cyber-bullying and sexting are currently two of the biggest challenges facing Irish parents and teachers. "Sexting" or "Sex texting" refers to individuals who take nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves and send them via mobile phone to others. Relatively recent research by the *National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy* (2009) reporting that 22% of teen girls and 20% of teen boys have engaged in sexting. From speaking with students Dr Griffin states that some of the main reasons they have stated for sending such images include being pressured into it, as a means of flirting, to get attention, to be popular or the worst cases are out of revenge. Sexting is also another means for those with an adult sexual interest in children to acquire pictures, and this has been indicated by the increasing number of self-produced images found amongst offender's collections.

We all know that bullying has always existed in its various forms (i.e. verbal, physical, emotional, psychological) but as Dr Griffin tells us cyber-bullying is a relatively new form of bullying and differs from more traditional

forms in a number of ways. Firstly, cyber-bullying is more invasive, happening 24/7 — the usual solace that was found at weekends or school holidays no longer exists. Secondly, cyber-bullying typically happens outside of school on home computers/laptops and through mobile phones in the evening. Thirdly, the duration of the abuse can be much longer, as images/videos/texts are passed among peers. Finally, the audience of cyber-bullying episodes is larger — where an online post can be seen by hundreds of online 'friends' or a text forwarded to an entire student population. Cyber-bullying involves the use of the Internet, mobile phones or other technological devices (i.e. Xbox, PlayStation) to repeatedly harass, embarrass, threaten, abuse or manipulate another individual or groups of individuals. Cyber-bullying can take many forms and Dr Griffin highlights some of the most common methods being used including:

Sending mean or abusive text messages/making mean or abusive calls

Posting mean or abusive messages/comments on social networking sites/online forums

Excluding people from 'friend' lists or blocking them for no apparent reason (Exclusion)

Spreading rumours online or through mobile phones

Hacking into someone's social networking account to send cruel or untrue messages/change details while posing as that person (aka 'Frapping')

Creating websites/false Social Networking accounts to make fun of another person

The main reason students give for engaging in cyber-bullying is that "it's fun". While the majority of students I have spoken with across Ireland are aware of the serious effects of cyber-bullying from publicized cases, the distance that technology creates means they do not readily see the impact when posting online or sending texts. The side effects of

cyber-bullying are extensive. Dr Griffin has experienced cases in Ireland where students have stopped eating, engaged in self-harm, are unable to sleep or have considered taking their own life because of the bullying they are experiencing online. Students can protect themselves against cyber-bullying by keeping their passwords private; picking their online friends carefully and monitoring the amount of personal information they post about themselves online.

Dr Griffin advises what to do if your child is the target of cyber-bullying. She says it is very important to remind the child that it is not their fault. So many students internalize what is being said about them and this can lead to long term problems. Encourage your child not to reply -this can lead to an escalation in cyber-bullying and also lets the bully know they are getting to them. If the bully is a 'friend' on Facebook, remove them. Report the issue to the website or mobile phone company (if it is through text/call). Most importantly make sure that your child knows

they can come to you if they are being bullied. Serious issues should be reported to the Gardaí— illegal issues include someone making inappropriate sexual suggestions, racist remarks, or persistent bullying that is seriously damaging to the victim's well-being.

Cyber-bullying is a behaviour issue, not a technology problem. Appropriate behaviour online is the same as appropriate behaviour in real life. It is therefore imperative that we teach our children how to be respectful and responsible when online. Children should be made aware of the consequences of cyber-bullying for all involved and encouraged to stop and think before they post online or send texts that may be deemed abusive or threatening. As Dr Griffin stated above: the best parental control is parental involvement. Being aware of your child's Internet and mobile phone use will greatly assist you in recognising if they are the subject of, or involved in, cyber-bullying.

Remember overall that there are many benefits to the new technologies, however

we must remain vigilant that is being used properly and not being abused. We must ensure that we are as careful about our children's activities in the cyber world as we would be if they are out and about in the real world.

For more information on Facebook's Privacy Policy see: www.facebook.com/about/privacy/

For more information on safety while using Facebook see: www.facebook.com/safety

For more information on cyber-bullying through mobile phone see: www.o2online.ie/o2/about-o2/content.php?cid=95 or through the Internet see: www.internetsafety.ie

The editor of the *Leitrim Guardian* is very grateful to Dr Maureen Griffin for sharing her knowledge on the above subject with our readers.

More information can be found at: www.isfsi.ie

Dromod Station in the snow. PHOTO BY PATRICIA KIERNAN

