



KILKEEL HIGH SCHOOL

*Creating Opportunity ~ Realising Potential
~ Developing Individuals ~*



June 2015

Dear Parents and Carers of Young People,

We have all been deeply saddened and profoundly shocked by the recent tragic death of young Ronan Hughes in Co. Tyrone. Ronan was the victim of online predators who lured him into their trust and then mercilessly blackmailed him until “they broke him”. That one of our children can be so cruelly abused in the apparent safety of his own home has shaken the whole NI community, powerfully highlighting the online threat that has the potential to impact upon any of our young people.

Ronan’s parents have asked that schools and families highlight again the importance of appropriate behaviour **online so that all of our young people remain safe** throughout the summer and afterwards. The Department of Education has also written to schools to emphasise this crucial message.

The Internet is a marvellous resource which has transformed the way in which we learn, do business, and socialise. It is also a place that provides cover for those whose intent is to harm and exploit our children. Behind the mask of anonymity paedophiles, extortionists, and organised gangs of criminals from any part of the world can reach our children in their bedrooms. They make young people feel safe. They become their “friends”. They use images of other victims to create a false identity and gain our children’s trust. In short, they groom our children. Home computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones, used inappropriately, are this generation’s version of the dark alleyway in which a menacing stranger lurks.

As we approach the summer break, we write to remind you that you need to be aware of the dangers our children face online. As parents and carers, you must become familiar with these issues and discuss them with your children. You cannot presume that your children will not engage in these activities. In recent days, CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre) has reported that sending nude/explicit images of themselves on social media (sexting) has become “normal” among teenagers and that Child Protection Officers are investigating an average of one case involving sexting **every day**. In some instances, young people are targeted by strangers who attempt to blackmail them over images they have been tricked into taking. Other cases involve private messages between friends being forwarded to others or a user posting a picture of him/herself on a website or social media with low privacy settings. This practice extends to even the youngest of post-primary pupils ~ and perhaps to those who are younger again ~ so it is never too early to start talking about internet safety to your children.

There are several things that **you can do** to address the issue of the inappropriate use of social media and we strongly recommend that you consider some of the following steps:

- Regularly check your child's phone to ensure that s/he has not shared sensitive or explicit material with anybody, even with friends;
- Ask your children who they are talking to online and what they are talking about;
- Advise your child only to communicate online with people s/he knows personally offline;
- Check that privacy settings are in place for all of your child's social networks;
- Remind your child that anything s/he posts online can be used and shared without permission;
- Do not allow your child to have access to the Internet on any device during the night;
- Take charge of your child's phone during the night;
- Remember that you can ask the network provider to switch off Internet access on your child's device if you have concerns;
- Be aware that there is also a number of Parental Control apps available for smartphones; these will allow you to have control of the material that reaches your child. Many of these are free and easy to install and manage;
- Visit some of the following websites to update your own knowledge:

www.thinkuknow.co.uk

www.getsafeonline.org

www.saferinternet.org.uk

www.deni.gov.uk/index/pupils-and-parents/pupils.htm

www.h2bsafetycentre.com

Most importantly, perhaps, you should speak to your children about the benefits and dangers of the Internet and remind them to seek help immediately if they are made to feel uncomfortable online, or are under threat of any kind. **Please don't underestimate the importance of talking to your child about these issues** and remember that, if a child has shared an image, the sooner s/he tells someone, the sooner it can be taken down, deleted or made much more difficult for anyone to find. Encourage them to speak to you or to any responsible adult. Make them aware that they can call any of the following numbers if they need advice:

PSNI on 101

24 hour Freecall Lifeline Helpline on 0808 808 8000

Childline on 0800 1111

We understand that this is a worrying message, but we do believe that it is warranted. We all take great care to ensure our children's safety in their homes, in their schools and in their social spaces and **it is essential that we exercise that same care and vigilance to protect them online.**

We would like to assure you of our continued efforts in this area and of our support as we all endeavour to make the Internet a safe place for our children to learn and to socialise.

Yours faithfully,

WD Cunningham

V Coert

W D Cunningham,
Principal

V Coert,
Designated Teacher