



MERIDIAN COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL AND NURSERY



Learning for Life



Friday 13th February 2026

Year 5 and Year 6

Dear Parents and Carers

I am writing to share my concerns about the language some of our older children in Years 5 and 6 are using in school.

Just recently, the increase in swearing, discriminatory language and overly sexualised language we are hearing in school is really worrying us. It is also upsetting lots of children, which I know you will agree is unacceptable. We need your support to help us educate the children about this behaviour.

Whilst we appreciate that some children will hear and use inappropriate language outside of school, we would ask you to support us by reminding your children that using this language in school goes against our school rules of ready, respectful and safe, and our school values of respect and kindness – which is completely unacceptable.

We will always contact parents when we hear about any swearing, discriminatory language or sexualised language being used in school and there will continue to be sanctions put in place. In extreme cases, this can result in a fixed term suspension from school. I will also speak to the children the first week back to reset our clear expectations about this.

As we are all aware, children accessing inappropriate content online outside of school is a very real issue for all children, particularly if they have regular unsupervised access to the internet via their phones or tablets. At the end of this letter there is some advice about protecting children's wellbeing, using YouTube safely and support if inappropriate content is seen so that you support your children when needed. We would strongly recommend that you regularly monitor children's phones and tablets to help keep them safe.

In addition to this, we are seeing the impact of out of school behaviour from some children when using WhatsApp, including insults, threats and spreading rumours, coming into school. At the end of this letter, there is also information about how to support your child using WhatsApp if you allow this.

At Meridian, we want to ensure all children feel safe and welcome in school and we need your support to manage this through ongoing conversations at home about inappropriate language, accessing or viewing adult content online and WhatsApp messages.

Thank you for your support in helping us ensure all children are safe and happy in school.

Yours sincerely

Ms. Westcott
Headteacher

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What Parents & Educators Need to Know about DIGITAL DEVICES & WELLBEING

Children aged 7 to 14 now spend roughly 3 to 5 hours a day on phones, tablets, consoles, and computers. That much screen time has parents and educators worried – not just about the hours logged, but about online safety and the knock-on effects on mental health. This guide brings together practical, expert-backed strategies so adults can nurture healthier digital habits and help young people thrive both on and offline.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

SLEEP DISRUPTION

Excessive screen time, especially before bed, can interfere with melatonin production and delay sleep onset. Children may struggle to concentrate or regulate emotions due to poor sleep hygiene linked to late-night device use.

ONLINE PEER PRESSURE

Social media platforms expose children to unrealistic standards and peer validation loops. Likes, comments, and follower counts can influence self-worth and lead to anxiety or risky behaviour to gain approval.

CYBERBULLYING EXPOSURE

Children may encounter bullying through messaging apps, games, or social media. This can be persistent and anonymous, making it harder to detect. Victims often feel isolated and reluctant to report incidents.

REDUCED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Time spent on screens often replaces outdoor play and physical activity. This sedentary lifestyle can contribute to obesity, poor posture, and reduced cardiovascular health.

EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

Fast-paced digital content can overstimulate young brains. Children may become irritable, impatient, or struggle with boredom and emotional control when not engaged with screens.

PRIVACY AND SAFETY RISKS

Children may unknowingly share personal information or interact with strangers online. Without guidance, they may not understand the long-term consequences of digital footprints or unsafe online behaviour.

Advice for Parents & Educators

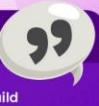
SET CLEAR BOUNDARIES

Establish screen-time limits and device-free zones, e.g. classrooms and dinner tables. Use parental controls and co-create a digital use agreement with children to encourage accountability. Trying a visual schedule or timer app can help children understand and stick to limits.



ENCOURAGE OPEN DIALOGUE

Create a safe space for children to talk about their online experiences. Ask open-ended questions like, "What did you enjoy online today?" to build trust and awareness. Try setting aside 10 minutes each day for a digital check-in where children can share what they've seen or done online.



MODEL HEALTHY HABITS

Children mirror adult behaviour. Demonstrate balanced device use, take regular screen breaks, and prioritise face-to-face interactions to reinforce positive behaviours. Making a habit of putting your phone away during meals and conversations can show that real-life interactions come first.



PROMOTE DIGITAL LITERACY

Teach children how to evaluate online content, recognise misinformation, and understand privacy settings. Empower them to think critically and act responsibly in digital spaces. You could use real-life examples from the news or social media to help children practise spotting fake information.



Meet Our Expert

Adam Gillett is Associate Vice Principal for Personal Development at Penistone Grammar School and works on secondment one day a week for Minds Ahead, which works with schools on improving their mental health provision.



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What Parents & Educators Need to Know about YOUTUBE

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Almost anyone with an internet connection knows YouTube. The Google-owned site lets anyone upload videos to be shared around the world, and as a result, it's an incredible resource with instant free access to material covering every conceivable topic. But with over 500 hours of video uploaded every minute, not all of it will be appropriate for young eyes.

INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

YouTube is free and can be accessed via numerous devices, even without creating a YouTube account. Some content is flagged as 'age-restricted' (requiring the user to be logged into an account with a verified age of 18), but children can still view some mildly inappropriate content. This can include profanity and violence, which some young users may find upsetting.

CONNECT WITH STRANGERS

YouTube recommends videos related to what the user has previously watched on their account, aiming to provide content that will interest them. This is intended to be helpful but it can also lead to binge-watching and screen addiction – especially if 'auto-play' is active. Users without an account are shown popular videos from the last 24 hours, which might not always be suitable for children.

RADICALISATION

YouTube's algorithm tends to promote content that's getting the most traffic – a lot of which can be quite extreme. This can be fine for harmless topics, but YouTube isn't regulated like television, and that means that conspiracy theories, fake news and hateful ideologies can occasionally surface to warp impressionable minds all too easily. Remember – the more they watch, the more they'll be recommended.

CONNECTING WITH STRANGERS

YouTube is a social media platform which allows people to interact with other (usually unknown) users. Account holders can leave comments on any video they have access to, as well as message other users directly. Connecting with strangers online can potentially lead to children being exposed to adult language, cyberbullying and – in the worst cases – online predators. If a child is creating content themselves, this can increase the likelihood of them becoming a target.

TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

YouTube is teeming with trends and challenges, some of which are fun to watch and join in with. Children often find these immensely entertaining and might want to try them out. Most challenges tend to be safe, but many others may cause physical or emotional harm to children who watch or copy them. The painful 'salt and ice challenge' – where people use these two ingredients to burn their skin – is just one of many examples.

SNEAKY SCAMMERS

The comments sections of popular content creators regularly have scammers posing as that influencer, attempting to lure users into clicking on their phishing links. Scammers impersonate YouTubers by adopting their names and profile images, and often offer cash gifts or 'get rich quick' schemes. Children may not realise that these users aren't who they claim to be.

Advice for Parents & Educators

APPLY RESTRICTED MODE

For older children, Restricted Mode is an optional setting that prevents YouTube from showing inappropriate material (such as drug and alcohol abuse, graphic violence, and sexual content) to underage viewers. To prevent children from chanceing across age-inappropriate content on the platform, we would recommend enabling Restricted Mode on each device that they use to access YouTube. It's worth also turning the auto-play feature off, to prevent YouTube's algorithm automatically recommending something inappropriate.



TRY GOOGLE FAMILY

Creating a Google Family account allows parents and carers to monitor what their child is watching, uploading, and sharing with other users. It will also display their recently watched videos, searches, and recommended videos. In general, a Google Family account gives a parent or carer oversight of how their child uses sites like YouTube and helps to ensure that they are only accessing appropriate content.

MONITOR ENGAGEMENT

YouTube is the online viewing platform of choice for billions of people, many of whom are under 18. Younger children will watch different content to older ones, of course. You may want to keep an eye on how children interact with this material – and, if applicable, with content creators – to understand what they're interested in. Remember that creators often share content outside of YouTube, so don't ignore their web presence elsewhere!

CONSIDER YOUTUBE KIDS

It's possible to sidestep most inappropriate content completely via Google's own YouTube Kids app for Android handsets and iPhone. This lets you filter content by "preschool" (4 and under), "younger" (ages 5 to 8) and "older" (ages 9 to 12). This isn't a perfect substitute for personal supervision, as the app's filtering system is automated, and Google can't manually review all videos.

CHECK PRIVACY SETTINGS

YouTube gives users the option of uploading videos as 'private' or 'unlisted' – so they could be shared exclusively with family and friends, for example. Comments on videos can also be disabled and channels that a child is subscribed to can be hidden. If the child is only uploading videos set as 'private', they are far less likely to receive direct messages from strangers.

LIMIT SPENDING

Although YouTube is free, it does offer some in-app purchases. For example, users can rent and buy TV shows and movies to watch. If you'd like to avoid children purchasing content online, limit their access to online payment methods. Many parents have discovered the hard way that a child happily consuming a paid-for series quickly leads to an unexpected bill!

Meet Our Expert

Alan Martin is an experienced technology journalist who has written for the likes of *Wired*, *TechRadar*, *Tom's Guide*, *The Evening Standard* and *The New Statesman*.



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What Parents & Carers Need to Know about AGE-INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT 18

"Inappropriate" means different things to different people. What's acceptable for one age group, for example, may be unsuitable for a slightly younger audience. Online, young people can chance upon inappropriate content in various ways – from pop-up ads to TikTok videos. The increasingly young age at which children become active in the digital world heightens the risk of them innocently running into something that they find upsetting or frightening. Trusted adults need to be able to help children be aware of what to do if they're exposed to age-inappropriate content.

WHERE IS IT FOUND?

SOCIAL MEDIA

Age-inappropriate content is easily accessible through many social media platforms. TikTok, for instance, is hugely popular with young people but is arguably best known for clips featuring sexualised dancing or profanity. Some social media users also express hate speech or promote eating disorders and self-harm, which could cause lasting damage to a child's emotional and mental health.

GAMING

Gaming is an enjoyable source of entertainment, but many popular titles can expose children to inappropriate material such as violence, horror, gambling or sexually explicit content. Playing games unsuitable for their age risks normalising to children what they are seeing. Some games also include in-game chat, where other (usually older) online players often use language that you probably wouldn't want your child to hear or repeat.

STREAMING

The range of video streaming services available online means that users can find almost anything they want to watch on demand. Children are therefore at risk of viewing TV shows and movies which contain nudity, drug and alcohol abuse, explicit language and extreme violence. Unfortunately, these streaming platforms can't always determine that it's not an adult who's watching.

ADVERTS

Online adverts frequently include age-inappropriate content: usually gambling and nudity or partial nudity, although adverts for alcohol or e-cigarettes are also common. Some search engines also feature adverts that are responsive to your search history: so if you've recently looked up a new horror movie, shopped for lingerie or ordered alcohol online, then the ads appearing on screen could reflect this the next time your child borrows your device.

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Advice for Parents & Carers

TALK IT THROUGH

Embarrassment or fear of getting into trouble can make it difficult for children to talk openly about age-inappropriate content they've watched. Remind your child they can always come to you if they're troubled by something they've seen online, without worrying about consequences. Before offering advice, discuss what they saw, how they felt and how they came to find the content in question.

CONNECT, DON'T CORRECT

If your child's been particularly distressed by exposure to content that wasn't suitable for their age, it's important to offer guidance to prevent them from repeating the same mistake – but it's equally vital to help them deal with the emotions that the situation has raised. You could tell them about any similar experiences you might have had at their age, and how you dealt with it.

BLOCK, REPORT, CONTROL

After discussing the problem, you and your child can take action together. This could include blocking any inappropriate sites and reporting any content which violates a platform's rules. To further safeguard your child online, set up parental controls on internet-enabled devices that they use. This will significantly reduce the chances of your child being exposed to age-inappropriate content in future.

GET SPECIALIST HELP

Age-inappropriate content can potentially have a negative impact on a child's mental health, which is sometimes displayed through changes in their behaviour. If the problem becomes more severe, you might consider reaching out to a mental health professional or an expert in this field who can provide you and your child with the proper support.

STAY CALM

Even though it is obviously difficult to stay rational in a situation where your child has been put at risk, it's essential to think before you react. Your child may well have hesitated to open up to you about watching inappropriate content for fear of the consequences, so being calm and supportive will reinforce the notion that it would be easy to talk to you about similar issues in the future.

Meet Our Expert

Cayley Jorgensen is a Registered Counsellor with The Health Professions Council of South Africa, and she runs a private practice offering counselling to children, teenagers and families. Her main focus is creating awareness and educating the community on the mental health pressures of today's world, as well as resources and techniques to understand and cope better.



Sources: <https://www.education.gov.za/documents/about/programme/bullyingopen/ageinappropriate.pdf> | <https://www.safety.gov.za/documents/training-professionals/professional-learning-programme/teachers/inappropriate-content-factsheet> | <https://www.educationality.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/childrens-media-literacy-year-7.pdf>

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What Parents & Educators Need to Know about WHATAPP

WhatsApp is a free messaging service owned by Meta which allows users to send text and voice messages, make video calls, share multimedia – such as images, videos, documents and polls – and have group chats. WhatsApp messages are encrypted, meaning only the sender and the recipient can view what is sent. While this privacy may sound attractive on paper, this app comes with several associated risks that must be considered – especially for younger users.



WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

GROUP CHATS

Group chats let friends talk together but can pose problems for young users. They might feel excluded – like discovering events they weren't invited to. Hurtful comments can also escalate quickly, as more people join in, amplifying the impact through a wider audience.



EVOLVING SCAMS

WhatsApp's popularity makes it attractive to scammers. Tactics include impersonating a child in an 'emergency' to request money, or triggering a login code, then pretending to be WhatsApp and asking for it – giving them access to private messages and personal data.



CHANNELS

'Channels' let users follow topics anonymously, interacting only through polls or emoji reactions. However, fake channels can mimic real ones, spreading misinformation, hate speech, or phishing for personal data. WhatsApp may also collect and share channel-following info with third parties, raising privacy issues.



DISAPPEARING MESSAGES

Disappearing messages help share sensitive info, but young people may wrongly assume they're fully private. Senders can opt for their message to vanish after 24 hours, 7 days, or 90 days – or for media, after one view. However, recipients can still save them by bookmarking or taking screenshots, reducing their privacy.



Advice for Parents & Educators

EMPHASISE CAUTION

Encourage children to treat unexpected messages with caution. Get them to consider, for example, whether it sounds like something a friend or relative would really send them. Make sure they know never to share personal details over WhatsApp, and to be wary of clicking on any links in messages. Setting up two-step verification adds a further layer of protection to their WhatsApp account.



THINK BEFORE SHARING

Help children understand why it's important to stop and think before posting or forwarding something on WhatsApp. It's easy – and all too common – for content sent to one user to then be shared more widely, and even publicly on social media. Encourage them to consider how an ill-judged message might damage their reputation or upset a friend who sent something to them in confidence.



ADJUST THE SETTINGS

It's wise to change a child's WhatsApp settings to specify which of their contacts can add them to group chats without needing approval. To do this, go to 'Privacy', then 'Groups'. You can give permission to 'My Contacts' or 'My Contacts Except...'. Additionally, if the child needs to use 'live location', emphasise that they should enable this function for only as long as they need – and then turn it off.



CHAT ABOUT PRIVACY

Have a conversation with youngsters about how they're using WhatsApp, emphasising that it's for their own safety. If you spot a 'Locked Chats' folder, you might want to talk about the sort of messages that are in there, who they're with and why they have been hidden. Also, if a young user has sent any 'view once' content, discuss their reasons for using this feature.



Meet Our Expert

Dr Claire Sutherland is an online safety consultant, educator and researcher who has developed and implemented anti-bullying and cyber safety policies for schools. She has written various academic papers and carried out research for the Australian Government comparing internet use and sexting behaviour of young people in the UK, USA and Australia.



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