

Head of Service: Helen Budge
Executive Director: Brian Doughty

Schools Service
Education and Social Care Department
Hayfield House
Hayfield Lane
Lerwick
Shetland, ZE1 0QD



Telephone: 01595 744000
Fax: 01595 692810
schools@shetland.gov.uk
www.shetland.gov.uk

If calling please ask for
Maggie Spence
Direct Dial: 01595 744085

Our Ref:
Your Ref: MS/tl/M20/17/002

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Dear Parent

Internet Usage at Home – A worrying development

Internet safety for children and young people is something we should all take very seriously as a school. It has recently come to our attention that a large number of pupils have become members of online “social networking” websites such as Bebo, Myspace, Friendster and Facebook.

Bebo is very popular in Shetland and a rapidly growing website that currently has over 4 million users in the UK. The website’s audience is school age children (over 13) and young adults at university. Users are listed under their school or college name. Once users have registered they create profiles (descriptions) of themselves and their interests with the ability to place pictures, videos, drawings, written statements and quizzes on the site. They then invite their “friends” to view the site and comment. It is the way that “friends” work that has led many Internet safety experts to express concerns about the site.

On visiting a friend’s site you automatically see their other friends (who maybe much older), you can then visit any of these friends sites and then their friends and so on. Users can restrict access to their site but it appears very few use this facility.

Why should parents worry? The website itself has rules that it asks its users to follow. For example, users **must** be over 13. We know that pupils in primary departments have lied about their age to gain access.

Parents and teachers should be advising children not to place personal information on the Internet, such as their age, address, school details, pictures of themselves and other children, phone numbers, email addresses and any other contact details.

Another cause for concern is the nature of material that is being shared by users on the site. Whilst some language and topics are appropriate for older teenagers, the nature of the friends network means that the same information is being shared by children as young as ten. Older pupils tend not to include younger children deliberately but they are simply not understanding the nature of the website that they are using.

The website is of course not only for school pupils. Many have links to users who have left school, or who live throughout Shetland, Scotland and the whole of the UK. They know many of the users but



some are only known through the Internet and there is absolutely no sure way of checking that these people are who they are claiming to be.

The Internet is used by predatory paedophiles who pretend to be much younger. For example, some children and young people have been persuaded to provide pictures that can only be described as “soft porn” or to meet up with people whose intention is to sexually abuse them. Please be aware that the sending and receiving of such pictures is illegal. Not all sexual offenders are older men, so young people also need to be on their guard against inappropriate requests and activities from other young people as well. Where you become aware of your child being targeted for sexual exploitation this should always be reported to the school or direct to Duty Social Work on 01595 7444421 as it may require investigation for the protection of other young people.

WiredSafety.org is the world’s largest Internet safety and help group. They explain that the problems encountered in social networking or other anonymous online communities typically fall into three categories:

- ID theft, fraud and privacy abuses;
- Cyberbullying, cyberstalking and harassment; and
- Sexual predators, con artists and sexual exploitation.

At schools, our first responsibility is to create a safe Internet environment for our pupils to use educationally. The Internet is filtered in our school and Bebo and all other such communities have always been, and will continue to be, blocked for all users.

The use of the Internet by children out of school is of course the responsibility of you as parents/carers. It is up to each parent/carer to make appropriate choices for their own children/young people, taking into account age, understanding and maturity.

If you would like any further information or advice please contact your child’s school, who will be happy to discuss this or any other issues you have. Further information can of course be found online, useful sites are:

www.bbc.co.uk/chatguide <http://www.kidsmart.org.uk/>

www.WiredSafety.org www.bebo.com

There are also many “net nanny” filtering software solutions available and information about these can be found on the BBC website and Kidsmart. However no software is foolproof and we cannot always be sure that every Internet connection our children use is filtered. The best way to help our children to stay safe is to educate them on safe use of the Internet, this particularly means not giving information out that could put them at risk.

Thank you for time and I hope you agree with us that this was an issue worthy of bringing to your attention.

Yours sincerely

Helen Budge
Head of Schools

