

Gooseberry Alert No 49 Online Relationships

Technology is now an integral part of life for children and young people. We have information and entertainment at our fingertips, we can keep in touch with friends and family at a distance and we can easily share special moments in our lives. The ability to connect brings many advantages including providing forums where young people can find emotional support and advice. Unfortunately, the need for that emotional support and advice may also have its origins in the behaviour of others online. Although we teach young people about good digital citizenship and the need to treat others with respect and kindness, we know that there are many instances where people, young or old, famous or ordinary, use the online space to bully, exclude or demean. We also know that the perfectly curated lives presented online can result in feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem in others.

As with so many things, education is central to coping with these challenges. For very young children, knowing not to respond to contact from new people online is key to their safety. But as they grow older, just as we prepare them and give them the freedom to go places on their own in the offline world, we need to educate them on how to engage safely with others online. They need to know about keeping their personal information private, regulating their time online, how to recognise warning signs in an online relationship and to have the confidence to take back their trust in someone if necessary. They should know how to block and report worrying behaviour, to recognise when they need help and have the confidence to seek it.

In your school:

- How do you teach your students and their parents, to communicate safely online?
- What opportunities do you provide to safely practice and demonstrate independence, decision making and positive behaviours online?
- How do you support your students and their parents when there is a problem online?

There has been a welcome increase in awareness and openness about mental health issues. It helps to encourage young people to be aware of their emotions and to consider how different types of behaviour (both off and online) can make people feel. It is important that they realise how bullying, excessive time online and unhealthy comparisons with others can impact on mental health and have potentially long-term consequences. Make them aware of the facilities for support within your school.

Discuss the following questions:

- 🗣️ How can what you see online affect your mood?
- 🗣️ How could you make a positive contribution to your online community?
- 🗣️ How can you recognise when your (or a friend's) low mood is a cause for concern?
- 🗣️ How can you recognise when you (or a friend) is spending too much time online?
- 🗣️ Who could you speak to for support if you are feeling low or sad?
- 🗣️ Do you agree, that communicating your feelings is easier online? Explain your thoughts.
- 🗣️ How can you help regulate the time you spend online?
- 🗣️ Do your family and teachers always understand the importance of your online life?
- 🗣️ How would you like your families and school to support you with your online life?

You are welcome to share this with your school community so long as you reference Gooseberry Planet Ltd as your source.