A PARENT'S GUIDE TO THE INTERNET

What is the internet?

The internet is a large number of computers all over the world linked together with cables. In most cases, each of these computers is also linked locally to a number of other computers, in a local network. It is possible for someone using one of those computers to access any information on any of the other computers. Universities and Government organisations established the system for the fast and efficient transfer of largely text-based information around the world directly from one computer to another.

It is possible for other people, outside these local networks, to connect to the Internet by using standard telephone lines between their computers and those already connected to the Internet. A number of companies specialise in providing this service for a fee.

What are News Groups?

These are collections of messages written for public readership rather than addressed to an individual. Each collection, or group, of messages is about a particular subject or theme. Individuals can reply to these messages, and these replies are also public. In this way it is possible to track a multi-way conversation about an important issue of the day. At present there are no more than 10,000 different topics available for discussion, from specialist science research, to support groups for asthma, to fans of James Bond movies. Most of the press concern for pornography on the Internet refers to newsgroups but they are the easiest way for school Internet providers to police.

What is the World Wide Web?

To make the appearance of information available through the Internet more attractive, and to assist people in finding information more easily, it is now possible for special pages of information to contain text, colours, pictures, sound and video. These pages, collectively, make up what is known as the World Wide Web. Most of these pages include information on the location of other pages on the World Wide Web, and it is possible to follow up links between pages with similar or related content. Moving from one page to another, regardless of where in the world they might be located, is called browsing, or surfing the net or web. Many of these Web pages contain information that may be useful in the classroom, and it is presented in a way that is often easy to use.

A number of UK suppliers including BT and Research Machines. Offer schools the facility of keeping their own pages on the Internet. These school "home pages" might describe the school's activities to outsiders or explain project work that pupils are involved in.

What is Electronic Mail (E-mail)?

This is merely a way of sending messages from one person to another via the Internet. Each Internet user has a unique e-mail address (such as anybody@msn.com) and by sending a message to this address, the recipient can read the message the next time he or she connects to the Internet. Internet e-mail address are usually provided along with a schools' connection to the Internet and normally pupils will have their own e-mail address.

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What are Social Network Sites?

Sites such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook allow people to keep in touch with friends using photographs, videos and message boards. These sites are very popular with young people but they do introduce potential risks including cyberbullying, misuse of personal information and contact by adults with a sexual interest in children. Social networking sites provide safety tools which allow the use of Privacy Settings. Parents should ensure that these tools are used to which give control of who can see, make comments or copy photographs from their child's social networking site.

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is the use of mobile phones and the internet, deliberately to upset someone else. This can take a range of different forms, such as nasty text messages on mobile phones, instant messaging in chat rooms, posting of images or messages on social networking sites or video sharing sites.

This type of bullying is particularly distressing as the target can be reached at any time and any distressing material can often be seen by a large audience causing humiliation to the person concerned.

Bullying incidents often start off as a joke which quickly get out of hand, children should be encouraged to always respect others and to be careful of what they say or post online.

What are the dangers of the Internet referred to in the media?

It is true that there is some material on the Internet that should be offensive to most people, such as pornography, racist and fascist material; students, if unsupervised, might access this. The provider that we use tries to 'filter' known offensive locations of material of this kind, but there are too many sites on the Internet for this filtering to be 100% effective.

The only guaranteed way to block access to this kind of material is to have a restricted range of pages available, in which case many of the advantages of the global and dynamic nature of the Internet may be lost. It is a feature of the Internet that the information available is free. Increasing restrictions will undoubtedly lead to systems of charging for access to specific material, in addition to the other costs described. An alternative system is to educate pupils and encourage an acceptable use policy and partnership between home and school in dealing with the less savoury side of Internet use.

Where can I get more information?

Parental guidance to safe use of the Internet is available on the www.thinkyouknow.co.uk website. This includes frequently asked questions and guidance about Chat Rooms, Social Networking, Gaming, Mobile Phones, Grooming and Online Gaming.

There are many magazines in newsagents that cater for beginners-advanced use of the Internet. If you have any specific questions please contact the school and ask for the ICT Co-ordinator.

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More Information

There will be an opportunity for parents/carers to come in during the first half of the new term for an informative presentation on keeping your child safe online. Information and dates will be published within the Principal's weekly letter during September.

You can also visit our school site www.sheffieldsprings-academy.org and click on the Parents tab for more information.