



THE CORBET SCHOOL

Headteacher Dr Jane Tinker BSc MA(Ed) EdD NPQH

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Dear parent / carer

Online Safety: Social Media, AI Chatbots and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)

As children grow in independence, many spend increasing amounts of time online using mobile phones, social media platforms and digital tools. This factsheet has been produced to support families in understanding three key online safety areas: **social media use, AI chatbots and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)**, and how you can help keep your child safe at home.

Social Media and Mobile Phone Use

Mobile phones and social media can be positive tools for communication, learning and connection. However, they can also present challenges, including exposure to inappropriate content, online conflict, cyberbullying and excessive screen time. Research consistently shows that children are safest online when parents and carers remain actively involved and set clear boundaries.

We strongly encourage parents and carers to:

- Know which apps and social media platforms their child is using
- Set age-appropriate limits on screen time and app access
- Keep devices out of bedrooms overnight where possible
- Regularly check privacy settings and friend/follower lists
- Talk openly about online behaviour, respect and digital footprints

Helpful basic rules around social media include:

- No social media accounts without parental knowledge and approval
- No sharing of personal information, images or videos with people they do not know offline
- No taking or sharing images or screenshots of others without permission
- Students should be fully dressed in video calls and photographs
- Treat others online with the same respect expected face-to-face
- No swearing in messages or voice calls
- Report and block inappropriate content or behaviour immediately
- Understand that online messages, images and posts can be permanent

Parents are also encouraged to monitor WhatsApp and messaging groups and to report online issues to school promptly, as online incidents often impact school life.

Please note that sharing images of staff or pupils without permission may result in sanctions.

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AI Chatbots

AI chatbots are computer programs designed to act like humans by answering questions and engaging in conversation. They are increasingly used by children and young people.

Common types include:

- General-purpose chatbots (e.g. ChatGPT, Google Gemini), often used for homework or questions
- Companion-style chatbots (e.g. Replika, character.ai), designed to act like friends or partners
- Chatbots built into social media platforms, such as Snapchat's *My AI*

When used appropriately, chatbots can support learning and entertainment. However, there are important safeguarding risks.

Safeguarding risks include:

- Emotional dependency, where children rely on chatbots for support instead of trusted adults
- Reinforcing harmful ideas, as chatbots may validate dangerous thoughts without challenge
- Promoting stereotypes or extremist views, due to how chatbot data is sourced
- Inappropriate or sexualised content, including explicit conversations or images
- Impact on development, with concerns around social, emotional and thinking skills
- Privacy and data risks, as children may share personal information without understanding how it is stored or used

How parents and carers can help:

- Talk openly about how chatbots work and remind children that AI is not a real person
- Agree rules around when, where and how chatbots can be used
- Encourage children to question information and check facts
- Monitor use where possible and use parental controls
- Block inappropriate chatbot apps, particularly companion-style chatbots
- Reassure children that they can talk to you about anything they see online

Warning signs may include increased secrecy, withdrawal from real-life relationships, mood changes after device use, or excessive late-night screen time.



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Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)

A Virtual Private Network (VPN) is an app or program that hides a user's location and online activity by routing their internet connection through a private "tunnel".

While VPNs are often used legitimately by businesses, children may use them to bypass age restrictions and online safety filters, particularly since the introduction of the Online Safety Act 2023.

VPNs can be installed as:

- Apps on smartphones or tablets
- Browser extensions
- Programs on computers or laptops

Many VPNs are free, but free VPNs often carry higher risks.

Risks of VPN use include:

- Bypassing age restrictions to access adult or harmful content
- Exposure to inappropriate websites or social media platforms
- Data collection and sale of browsing information
- Malicious software that can compromise a device or personal information

How to spot VPN use:

- Check download histories for unfamiliar apps or programs
- Look for secretive behaviour, such as hiding screens or devices
- Notice adverts in foreign languages or currencies
- Look for key or shield icons near Wi-Fi or battery indicators on devices

What parents and carers can do:

- Have open, non-judgemental conversations about online behaviour
- Explain why restrictions exist and the risks of bypassing them
- Set clear rules about which apps and websites are allowed
- Use parental controls on devices

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Working Together

We talk to pupils in school about online safety, harmful content and responsible digital behaviour. These messages are most effective when reinforced at home.

Please find below a link to a helpful guide for parents:

['What I wish my parents or carers knew...' Children's Commissioner launches guide for parents and carers on managing children's digital lives | Children's Commissioner for England](#)

If you have concerns about your child's online activity or wellbeing, please contact the school so we can work together to support them.

Thank you for your continued partnership in helping children develop safe, respectful and responsible digital habits.

Yours sincerely

Mr G Simms
Deputy Headteacher

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