

October 18, 2016

Dear Middle School Parents,

Over the weekend, an incident occurred between students on Instagram that, while it did not occur during school hours or on school-issued devices, serves as a reminder about the importance of ongoing family conversations about the responsible use of technology. As articulated in the Day School Handbook, students are expected to use technology ethically and appropriately at all times. Like any other academic skill, practicing this at school and reinforcing it at home lead to positive and productive lifelong habits.

I ask for your partnership in engaging your student in dialogue about three important elements of the ethical and appropriate use of technology: communication, unintended consequences, and perception.

Communication: We hold communication and interaction between members of the Annie Wright community to a very high standard, and for the most part our students are exemplars of kindness and respect, which makes negative interactions all the more jarring. Whether in person, in writing, online, or via phone, respectful communication is fundamental to the building of our community, and we are attentive to the ways members of the community communicate with each other. The use of derogatory language and insults, even if intended for humor, is never acceptable, and it is our hope that the expectations to which students are held on campus will be reflected off campus as well.

Unintended consequences: Online communication reflects other ways of communicating offline, but students now face consequences that previous generations of students did not. Electronic communications last and sometimes come back to haunt people even years later, so we urge great care and caution in using any online or email platform. Things that seem funny in the moment or that might be written off as a flippant reaction now outlast the incidents that inspired them.

Perception: No matter how an action between two people is intended, its perception is what affects them. Often, online and virtual interactions make it harder to remember that there is another person on the opposite end of the communication, and that much nuance is lost without seeing someone's face or hearing one's voice.

We frequently remind students that they should never share their login information (username, password, etc.) with anyone except their parents, and we strongly encourage students to share login information for school-issued devices and accounts with their parents. This is not to encourage parents to frequently access student accounts but to ensure that parents can access these devices and accounts in case of emergency or if circumstances or behavior warrants it.

Some students have accounts on social media applications or networks like Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook, but the minimum age for using and maintaining accounts on these applications is 13 (the minimum age for other applications like WhatsApp and Vine is higher). If your student is not yet 13, s/he should not be accessing these sites at all. If your student is 13 and maintains accounts through these kinds of apps, I would strongly encourage having a conversation with your student about these accounts and about your expectations for behavior through these apps. Monitoring their use of these media is essential both for their safety and for their ability to develop habits of appropriate use. One useful resource as you think about these conversations is Common Sense Media (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>). The site includes up-to-date research and guidelines for engaging various media, including social media (<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/social-media-social-life-how-teens-view-their-digital-lives>).

Thank you in advance for engaging your student in conversation about this.

Thanks,
Bill