



UFS International

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*“Semper Sursum - Always Aim High”*

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To the UFS Community,

Over the course of the past couple of days, we have had to engage with a number of children who have got themselves into rather serious trouble with respect to their use of their cell phones and social media. As we enter into a long weekend during which our children will have more than ample time to relax and possibly engage on social media, I thought it prudent to write a few words on this matter.

I'd like to start off with a disclaimer! My thoughts that follow might lead readers to believe that I am somewhat of a social media luddite. This is certainly not the case as I am most certainly someone who prides himself on being connected, progressive and future focused. But we need a balanced perspective.

Social media has its advantages. This can include building social networks, connecting over broad geographic and cultural barriers, entertainment, creativity and humour. However, it is most certainly fraught with potential pitfalls. And some of these pitfalls might not be obvious to us as parents or teachers.

Numerous studies show that high levels of social media use can be linked to anxiety and depression. Two studies conducted in 2019 provide cause for concern. A study of more than 12 000 13 to 16 year olds in England showed that using social media more than three times a day was linked to poor mental health and well-being. Similarly so in the USA, where a study of 6 500 12 to 15 year olds who used social media more than three hours a day presented heightened risk for mental health.

I do think that there is great irony in the term 'Social Media'! Whilst it undoubtedly connects people, I believe it actually compromises children's social and life skills development. Socialising in person requires children to learn to read body language and facial expressions. Learning how to respond to these physical cues, and indeed to engage in conversation in 'real time', (as opposed to taking time to type considered responses, or worse, reverting to using emoticons to express one-self), are essential life skills. Being able to detect minor vocal inflections or tiny eye movements are vital to fully perceiving how someone might be feeling, and the possible need to be more empathetic or supportive.

As with any skill, it is best honed through practice. Addressing the issues involved in and repairing a friendship issue does not come easily to many children. Doing this face-to-face requires emotional intelligence, courage, conviction and much more. Again, attributes and skills that are not honed through cyberspace. As human beings, our primary communication platform is through talking, and ideally, talking face-to-face. In order to retain our human-ness, it should always remain this way.

I was chatting with someone the other day who made the great point of how crazy it is that we as humans, need to prove to a computer that we are in fact a human! How many of us have during a Google search or similar activity been confronted with the 'reCAPTCHA' system that requires us to *'click on all the boxes with fire hydrants'* to prove that we are humans? A seemingly innocuous task that enables web sites to distinguish between human users and automated or artificial intelligence users, but nevertheless, the notion of us having to prove our human-ness in an age of technology sparks some serious thought!

And so, I wish to encourage our parents to talk openly with your children about technology and social media at some stage over the weekend, how they can be responsible digital citizens with integrity, and more importantly, what it means to be a child.

Discussion on the following points might be helpful:

- ✓ Your right, (and responsibility!) as a parent to monitor their devices and social media accounts.
- ✓ Setting reasonable limits to screen time and social media interaction.
- ✓ The importance and value of in-person interaction and activities.
- ✓ How interaction over social media is different to face-to face engagement.
- ✓ What is not OK. Cyberbullying, gossiping, name calling etc.
- ✓ The need for discernment. To think carefully about what they see and not necessarily believe everything they see. Help them to understand that social media is full of unrealistic imagery and that they should value who they are as an individual, and value their family and blessings.

As per earlier WhatsApp communication, on the basis of various requests from parents, the school shop will be open on Friday morning from 08h00 – 10h00 for the fitting of blazers, shirts and skirts. As previously communicated on a number of occasions, children will be allowed to wear the old school uniform for the duration of this year as we fully appreciate that many of them will still fit into those items and hence the need to purchase the new uniform can be delayed for 2023.

I wish you all a very blessed long weekend.

Yours in Education,



Gareth Allman  
Executive Principal

