Elementary Parent Letter About Social Networking

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Dear Parents/Guardians,

This seems like an opportune moment, with school safety on everyone's mind, to remind you that online safety is also an important component of overall student safety, especially now during the winter months when children spend more time inside using computers, laptops, tablets, and smart phones to go on the Internet.

A recent technology concern we wanted to bring to your attention is the simultaneous trend of younger and younger children using the Internet in loosely supervised or unsupervised situations outside of school, and doing so through sites such as Facebook, a social networking site, and Instagram, a photo sharing site owned by Facebook. These sites, and others like them, were designed with teenagers and adults in mind. They are restricted by age to children who are at least 13 years-old. To use these sites, an elementary child must use someone else's account or lie about their birth year to establish their own account. Obviously this is a practice we do not endorse, but we realize this occurs with, or sometimes without, parent awareness or permission, oftentimes through older siblings or friends. It is natural for young children to want to emulate their friends and older role models but in this case, they may not be ready for the responsibility.

Beyond the ethical considerations, there are safety and behavioral implications that sometimes spill over into the school. Elementary children may not have the necessary maturity and judgment to use these sites appropriately. Comments, audio, photos, or videos may be posted without the permission of the subject, containing content that can be embarrassing or hurtful. Some children, who would not behave this way in person, may do so online because the immediacy is muted and once-removed by the technology. Moreover, children of this age do not realize that it is difficult, once something is posted, to take it back, because content can be printed, copied, saved, and forwarded to others.

In school, this is not an issue. Sites like these are blocked by our Internet filtering system and students pursue online learning activities under the direct supervision of their teachers. However, because we know this is a concern, our elementary technology standards include explicit lessons, for children in Grades 2-5, to promote Internet safety, online "netiquette," and Cyberbullying prevention. Our best advice for parents about how best to deal with these issues at home is to speak to your child directly, make your behavioral expectations clear, be involved with his or her virtual life just as you are with other daily activities, make sure you have access to any sites your child frequents and can see all the published content, and actively supervise your child when he or she uses technology. We even have an Internet Safety Resource Page on our Web site for parents to aid in this endeavor -
http://www.greatneck.k12.ny.us/GNPS/Pages/InternetSafety/internet.htm.

Working together, we can teach your child, both in school and at home, how to be a happy, healthy, safe, and appropriate user of modern communications technology. Feel free to contact us if you have any questions or concerns. We're here to help.

Yours Truly,

Marc Epstein, GNPS District Technology Director