

Internet and social media guidance for professionals working with young people

Purpose

This is the second in a series of three briefings about social media produced by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales. It provides examples of how professionals have used the internet, social media and mobile technology to work with and support young people.

Introduction

The internet and social media are providing ever more opportunities for people to communicate and interact. A range of methods can be used by professionals to engage with users of their services, such as e-learning, online networks and groups, and text messaging services.

Resources for professionals

Organisations such as the Department for Education (DfE) and the College of Policing have published guidance and resources aimed principally at

professionals who use the internet and social media to engage with young people. These resources have focussed particularly on issues which have already been identified as significant offline, prior to becoming priorities online, such as bullying and child sexual exploitation. They also provide guidance on e-safety which practitioners may find helpful such as in preventing victimisation and reducing risk factors for offending.

Box 1: Department for Education (DfE) Preventing Bullying

The DfE has published a range of guidance as part of [Preventing Bullying](#) advice for schools. The guidance attempts to help schools understand the law around bullying and to explain what DfE policies mean in practice. It also offers advice on tackling cyber-bullying.

Child sexual exploitation can occur without the young person realising. Online this manifests itself in behaviour

such as young people being persuaded to post sexual images of themselves on the internet and/or mobile phones. In some cases, the images can then be used as bargaining tools by the perpetrators and threats of violence and intimidation are used as methods of coercion, on and offline.

Box 2: College of Policing

The UK College of Policing have produced guidance on [Responding to child sexual exploitation](#). The guidance was not only designed to raise awareness of the issue but increase reporting and also increase safeguarding measures to help young people from being sexually exploited. Part of the guidance addresses the [risks that young people face online](#), and how people aiming to exploit children can utilise technology in order to do this - for example the report [If you Shine a Light you will probably find it](#) describes how GPS technology is available for mobile devices to identify the location where a photograph was taken, which can increase risks to young people who post images online.

Online fora

Virtual resource networks and online fora can be useful ways in which professionals can share advice, developments and resources.

Healthcare professionals have started to recognise the use of social media to develop virtual communities. In doing so they can share knowledge and experience, and prevent duplication of effort. They are also important social support mechanisms for many professionals, particularly remote workers or those required to travel around the country frequently.

Box 3: Online Fora - College of Policing and Youth Justice Board

The College have also developed an online forum - [POLKA \(the Police OnLine Knowledge Area\)](#) where members can network, ask questions, share insights, discuss ideas and suggest new ways of working.

The [Youth Justice Resource Hub](#) has been set up set up by the Youth Justice Board to meet the youth justice sector's effective practice and professional development needs. The Hub includes an online [Question and Answer Forum](#) for professionals, where people working in the sector can post discussion threads.

Using social media and online technology to support young people

Use of social media and online technology as support for the delivery of interventions has grown in recent years. Online interactions can offer individuals a higher level of anonymity and privacy, facilitating engagement. In addition, it can also be a means of accessing hard to reach populations, including people who have not previously engaged with more traditional styles of intervention, or on a particularly sensitive topic.

Working with young people using apps and messages

The anonymity of text messaging, along with the high level of mobile phone ownership and use amongst young people, makes them a very promising method to engage and interact with young people as service users. They are also cheap, easy to administrate and instantaneous.

Apps and messaging services, such as text and email, can provide access and

guidance to services for young people who may not access services by traditional methods. It can offer a service which works for both parties - accessible for the young person and manageable for the service. Some services have reported success with the use of text messaging via mobile phones to communicate with young people.

Setting up a messaging service for young people

In 2012 the UK coalition Government issued best practice guidance for school nurses entitled [Getting it right for children, young people and families](#). When developing the guidance the Department of Health worked with a range of agencies (such as the [National Children's Bureau](#) and [Netmums](#)) to capture the views of young people. Among the feedback they received was that young people felt that school nurses needed to start using technology such as text and email to help them become more accessible.

The Royal College of Nursing have also identified the use of messaging as an important part of interacting with young people. Their guidance to nurses on [The use of Digital Technology](#) offers specific advice to anyone considering setting up a messaging service (this could also be particularly relevant to YOTs and YOT workers considering something similar). Their guidance suggests:

- To provide an efficient service the specified phone should have sufficient text characters available which might be more than the standard 160-190
- The equipment provided to practitioners must be suitable for use, and be updated and maintained
- Coded messages (encryption/security) might be necessary to protect confidentiality, such as for

appointment reminders to under 16-year-olds

- An automated response to let the sender know their message has arrived safely is helpful
- Young people must be made aware that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if a disclosure is made
- A named contact should be responsible for a specified phone to maintain confidentiality.

This suggests that there are two important aspects of using social media for organisations to communicate with young people - the technical aspects must be in place and there also needs to be an important connection between online and offline communication.

This is supported by research commissioned by the third sector organisation Youthnet about how young people specifically interact with social media. They recommend that any online advice process is supplemented with physical support, such as helplines. Part of the advice process should also involve participation and self-directed learning¹.

Examples of using apps for engaging young people

Some examples of how technology or social media applications can be used to improve engagement between services and young people currently exist.

Healthcare seems quickly to have embraced newer technologies with the use of apps for healthcare such as the [mobile Community Health Workers](#) (mCHW) project in Kenya - developed as a collaboration between the Oxford University, Health Africa and the University College London Institute of Education. The project led to the design of an app to support Kenyan health workers, which was used to train workers

and help them provide appropriate interventions.

The use of apps has also been employed by the National Health Service in the UK.

Box 4: [PregStop! Chelsea Westminster Hospital](#)

In 2012 the hospital launched an App called [PregStop!](#) allowing clients to book an appointment by text message for the hospital's Family Planning Clinic - but also features an Emergency Calculator Tool to determine what emergency contraceptive options are available. The app also includes information about contraceptive methods and information about other services that the clinic provides. Users can also triage themselves on the hospital's website, find out where to seek treatment and book appointments.

Fewer examples of apps specific to youth justice are available, and even fewer of these in the UK.

Some apps, for example, have been developed providing downloadable legislation for youth justice professionals in India and the United States, while some apps have been developed for managing organisational caseloads, such as [Go Shift - Justice](#), developed for use in Australia.

There are also examples of organisations offering education and training via apps - in the UK the [Unitas Academy](#) offers its *Introduction to the Youth Justice System* training course via a free app.

A small number of youth justice organisations in the UK have also started to use apps to build and develop relationships with the young people they work with.

Box 5: Youth Justice apps

[MAYOT APP](#)

Middlesex University in partnership with West Mercia Youth Offending Service, the London Tri-Borough Youth Offending Service, and Oxfordshire Youth Offending Service have developed a mobile App to promote engagement between youth justice workers and young people in youth offending teams. The MAYOT_APP allows case workers to provide information to a young person to help them manage the requirements of their youth justice order. More information about MAYOT and further outputs are available [here](#).

[Restorative Justice - Essex Youth Offending Team](#)

This app is for use in pairs with a young person and a practitioner. It is intended to be a "conversation starter for a full Restorative Justice intervention". The first exercise is an impact circle which allows the young person who has committed a crime to move tiles out from the centre of the screen. The aim of this is to help them understand and discuss who has been affected by their crime. There is also a [YouTube video](#) describing how the app works.

The use of apps (or any social media) offers a great deal of potential in working with young people. However, they should not be seen as a replacement for developing interventions or building relationships - their strength seems to be in enhancing an existing offline relationship, and potentially helping to increase support available to young people. Services might realistically consider using mobile technologies to

share information, spread awareness and connect people. New resources are constantly being developed, updated and published online in app stores such as those of [Google](#) and [Apple](#).

Working with young people using online interventions

Apps, texts and emails lend themselves most effectively to reminders or prompts to keep in touch with young people. However, social media and online technology can also be used for more intensive and longer term interventions, particularly helping to support young people with behaviour change and promoting healthy and pro-social behaviours.

Young people's mental health

Mental health problems among young people can lead to a range of challenges. At any one time it is estimated that around 1.3 million young people aged 5-16 have a diagnosable mental health condition - with incidents higher among vulnerable groups such as young people who offend², Looked After Children and those in residential care³.

There are clearly benefits, therefore, to exploring how interventions might become more accessible and available to young people experiencing mental health problems. Recently there has been growing interest in delivering interventions in this area online⁴.

Computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can be effective at helping young people overcome problems such as depression and anxiety. Although effective treatments are available, however, only around 25% of young people who need mental health support receive it. This might be as a result of lack of contact with specialist mental health care

providers and lack of trained specialists, for example⁵.

In order to increase the amount and reach of support available to people, practitioners have turned to the use of computerised and online interventions, particularly computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (cCBT).

Box 6: Universal and targeted computerised cognitive behavioural therapy (Think, Feel, Do) for emotional health in schools: results from two exploratory studies

Studies using cCBT with young people have reported positive results as either a universal or targeted intervention - particularly for emotional problems in children and adolescents. The following conclusions have been identified for practitioners:

- Access to specialist mental health services for young people is limited
- cCBT programmes offer the potential to increase access to treatment
- cCBT delivered as a school-based emotional health intervention may reduce emotional symptoms in children and adolescents
- Child mental health professionals consider cCBT to be more effective as a supported intervention for mild and moderate problems.

A recent systematic review (a review looking only at the most robust evidence) into the benefits of cCBT interventions for mental health found that cCBT can be more cost-effective and often cheaper than offline care. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence have recommended using the cCBT packages [Beating the Blues®](#) for people with "mild and

moderate depression” and FearFighter.com for “panic and phobia”⁶.

cCBT programmes, such as those cited above, often require no expert administration - although NHS Choices does state that people can benefit from occasional meetings or phone calls with a therapist to guide their progress through these types of courses.

As well as cCBT there is also a range of other online mental health services available to support people with their mental health. These can be found on the NHS directory of online mental health services.

Online interventions with young people could be equally effective, if not more so, as many young people report feeling comfortable using these environments to seek information about sensitive topics such as mental health⁷.

Similar online interventions specifically in youth justice seem to be developing more slowly. However, one online programme developed in the US - Rise Above Your Situation - uses a behavioural change model to target both criminal behaviour and substance use, and provides assessments and interventions ideas.

Lessons learned from online interventions

The overall outcomes of cCBT are encouraging, showing significant positive effects on young people with depression and anxiety. Longer term effects have also been reported at 6 and 12 month follow-ups suggesting that virtual interventions can have a lasting effect on those that report positive results or outcomes⁸. These might include increased feelings of social support, reduced thoughts of self-harm, reduced sense of helplessness and an improved sense of control⁹. Although dropping out of programmes is a problem for online interventions, particularly as not

completing an online programme can lead to negative outcomes (i.e. further recurrences of symptoms). Factors related to programme completion and positive outcomes are connected to appropriate targeting of at risk individuals and engagement¹⁰. However, this is a new field which would benefit from a better understanding of which parts of these programmes are effective.

Further exploring the usefulness of online interventions seems to be particularly important given that as far back as 2006 the Healthcare Commission identified substantial areas for improvement in the mental health care provision for young people who offend. The Commission concluded that more children and young people who offend should have better access to appropriate healthcare, and that mental health professionals should have better input into Youth Offending Teams¹¹. This lack of appropriate provision was further identified in a report by YoungMinds in 2013 who found that young people can often be left for long periods while needing support or intervention¹².

Online interventions would seem to offer potential for increasing the reach of mental health services to young people.

The importance of face to face contact in online interaction

Research into cCBT shows that one of the most important factors in achieving positive outcomes with online interventions with young people is face-to-face support¹³. This can also be the case for other therapies¹⁴.

This suggests that while there is promise in professionals interacting with young people through social media, it is as important to use this in tandem with an offline intervention, as opposed to in place of it.

Resources aimed at keeping young people safe online

Many agencies and organisations have produced resources and guidelines aimed at those working with young people to help them stay safe online. Among other things they aim to help them understand the risks in using social media and on the internet.

Box 7: Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) ThinkUknow

CEOP's [ThinkUknow](#) site has a [Resources Portal](#) for children and young people, parents, carers, and professionals, with information about e-safety:

[Sexting in schools](#) contains practical advice about how schools can respond when a young person is involved in sexting. It includes how to support a child whose image has been shared.

[Nude Selfies: What Parents and Carers need to know](#) is a series of four short animated films for parents and carers offering advice on the risks associated with sharing images. The films also come with guidance on delivering workshops.

[Jigsaw](#) is a short film to help children and young people understand how to manage their personal information online, and what to do if they have any concerns.

[Thinkuknow](#) also offers face to face training for those working with young people, along with their [e-learning courses](#), offered with the launch of [Keeping Children Safe Online](#), developed jointly with the NSPCC.

The CEOP resources are particularly helpful, as they use situations taken from real world examples. They are largely

aimed directly at young people and encourage them to apply critical thinking to information they may access over the internet and through social media.

A number of other organisations have published a range of learning materials which they have made freely available on the internet - a more comprehensive directory of resources is available in the third and final report in this series - *Directory of online resources for youth justice professionals and young people*.

Preventing young people from accessing age inappropriate content

While some statutory organisations offer training, information provision and support online, an important way to ensure internet safety for young people is for agencies to liaise with Internet Service Providers.

Box 8: Internet Matters

In May 2014 the UK's four biggest Internet Service Providers (BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media) launched [Internet Matters](#), an independent not-for-profit organisation which aims to help parents keep their children safe online. Internet Matters has developed an online portal specifically designed for parents, carers and people who work with young people to access simple, easy and practical advice to make informed decisions when it comes to their online safety. The website offers guidance and information on a range of internet risks including: [cyber-bullying](#); [inappropriate content](#); [online pornography](#); [online grooming](#); [privacy and identity theft](#); [sexting](#); [self-harm](#) and [radicalisation](#). It also provides an [online tool](#) which allows parents to activate simple parental controls around the home.

Conclusion

Social media presents opportunities for young people and professionals working with them. This can include groups of young people that have been traditionally regarded as less visible or more complex to engage with.

A number of different approaches to using social media and online resources have been tried with professionals and young people, and highlighted in this briefing. These approaches are still developing and little research exists into their effectiveness. However, using any kind of method available to provide information, guidance and support to young people should be encouraged. Using social media to do this should be explored further as technology develops and becomes a more affordable and immediate way of engaging with professionals and young people.

Social media is now central to the everyday activities of many young people and they seem to have integrated their online and offline experiences into one overall life and developmental experience. This suggests that there would clearly be benefits for youth justice professionals to increase their use of technology and social media to communicate with young people and deliver interventions. However, in doing so, professionals and organisations should always consider young people's online safety as paramount.

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