

Safeguarding in the Context of Access to Technology and Use of Social Media

BSCB Strategy

2017

Contents

1.	Introduction	2-3
2.	Purpose of the Strategy	3-4
3.	What is Social Media?	4
4.	The Context of Use	5-6
5.	The Context of Risk	6-12
	The Five C's	
	Cyberbullying	
	Sexting	
	The Law of Sexting	
	Think before you Speak	
	Exploitation – CSE, Radicalisation and Gangs	
6.	Assessing and Managing Risk	12-13
	Safeguarding in the Context of Criminal Justice Responses	
7.	Keeping up with the Technology	14-15
	Learning through Experience	
	Continual Professional Development	
7.	Strategic Priorities	15-16
	Priority 1: Leadership	
	Priority 2: Improving Practice	
	Priority 3: Raising Awareness	
	Priority 4: Training & Development	

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The BSCB's overarching aim is to ensure that children and young people are seen, heard and helped. Critically, that they are seen, heard and helped in the context of their lives in both the offline and online places and spaces that they occupy.
- 1.2 With the growing use of technology and social media, all professionals need to adopt a much more sophisticated approach to their safeguarding responsibilities. They need to reflect on the changing nature of communication and how this impacts on practice issues, particularly those focused on the identification and assessment of potential risk. To do this successfully, professionals need to recognize that children and young people do not use technology and social media in isolation. Their offline and online worlds are converged and both need to be understood when trying to identify the type of support that a child, young person and their family might need. The importance of this escalates whenever there are concerns about children and young people suffering or being likely to suffer significant harm. In such circumstances, it is essential that both the offline and online risks are accurately assessed and effectively mitigated.
- 1.3 **A robust safeguarding process should always give consideration to how offline vulnerabilities might be reflected in a child's online behavior and vice versa. For the vast majority of young people, there is perhaps no greater influence upon the context of their lives than the space they occupy on-line.**
- 1.4 Professionals also need to continue their focus on circumstantial factors within the context of children's lives such as neglect, emotional abuse and direct or indirect suffering due to violent or abusive relationships. These negative dynamics can create levels of vulnerability that make children and young

people more susceptible to grooming, indoctrination into crime or other high risk activities.

- 1.5 We believe context is key. The context of young people's lives whether at home, in care, in education and health or amongst their peer group and intimate friendship circles will almost always be reflected in their online digital footprint. Professionals should actively consider this source of publically available information. An examination of it may disclose evidence of risk, help inform safeguarding decision making and the construction of protection plans. Many social media sites will reflect a range of issues in a child or young person's life. Where vulnerability and risk exists, that too will very often be visible.
- 1.6 Professionals also need to consider how vulnerability can arise for children who are looked after, come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have mental health difficulties, a disability, or are from an ethnic minority. These groups tend to be most at risk both offline and online (UKCCIS, 2012). The potential for harm can escalate significantly for many of them.
- 1.7 **To place this into context consider findings that suggest children with a disability are 3 times more likely to be abused or neglected than non-disabled children (NSPCC, Jones, L et al. 2012) and that children with Special Educational Needs are 18% more likely to be persistently cyberbullied over a prolonged period of time (DfE, 2012).**

2. Purpose of the Strategy

- 2.1 This strategy sets out the Bromley Safeguarding Children Board's (BSCB) ambition to ensure that children and young people are effectively safeguarded in the context of their access to technology and use of social media.
- 2.2 As a partnership, the BSCB is committed to ensuring that the approach to e-safety is not delivered in isolation, but rather integrated as part of our overall

approach to safeguarding children and young people. This strategy is therefore intended to complement, focus and support other BSCB strategies, policies and procedures alongside the associated practice guidelines set out within them.

- 2.3 The overarching aim is to promote a culture whereby professionals, communities and children and young people themselves are sufficiently educated and empowered to mitigate any risks arising from technology and social media.

3. What is Social Media?

- 3.1 Social media is a form of digital marketing and communication that is direct, personal, instant and responsive. It refers to Internet and mobile-based tools used for the creation, dissemination and discussion of information in textual, pictorial, audio, or video formats. In simple terms, social media is a set of online tools used to communicate and engage with people. It can include (but not be limited to) the following:

- Writing a blog or commenting on other people's blogs
- Micro-blogging e.g. Twitter
- Having a personal profile page on one of the social or business networking sites e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+
- Reviewing products or services on retailer sites, or customer review sites
- Taking part in online votes, polls and surveys
- Taking part in conversations on public and private web forums (message boards)
- Using specifically designed "Apps" like Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram

- 3.2 Since its inception, social networking has attracted a lot of negative publicity. This is largely due to incidents of online bullying, inappropriate behaviour and grooming by child sex abuse predators. The fact is, however, that such

damaging behaviour represents only a fraction of day-to-day life in the world of social media. The vast majority of online interactions in most of these online spaces are empowering and positive.

4. The Context of Use

4.1 Ofcom's (2015) annual communications market report stated that 90% of 16-24 year olds had a smart phone, with Facebook, Snapchat and WhatsApp being the most popular methods of communication (Ofcom, 2015). It also highlighted that smartphones are not just important for the young, but also for the poorest parts of society.

4.2 Whilst most social networking platforms apply age restrictions, given that there are no credible online age verification mechanisms; users are able to self-certify their age. 83% of 11 to 15 year olds, whose Internet usage was monitored, registered on a social media site with a false age. (Advertising standards Authority, UK, 2013). The environment is therefore complex, many users are not who they say they are and younger children are being exposed to a world that carries inherent risk.

4.3 It is reasonable to suggest that most children above the age of 10 will have a social media presence.

4.4 Social media is about building and maintaining a network of contacts and friends where users generate and share information, images and videos. The way in which someone uses social media and technology can give an indication into their personality and lifestyle. Undoubtedly a wealth of information can be found on social media.

4.5 However not all of the information you see will be true and some information can create a distorted perception of an individual or group.

- 4.6 It is therefore important to consider the veracity of any information harvested from an internet/social media search and place it in the context of **what is already known from a trusted source.**
- 4.7 Gathering information through the use of social media and technology (within an agreed framework of rights to confidentiality), should always be viewed by professionals as a necessary step to safeguard those children and young people we work with.
- 4.8 **Considering a child or young person's access to technology and use of social media should not be viewed as a box to tick during assessment, but an added extension of the safeguarding professionals' tool-kit and knowledge base.**

5. The Context of Risk

- 5.1 Online risks are not created by technology, but by the people who use and abuse the communication and sharing opportunities available. It is important that professionals use their experience and training to place potential risk in the context of what is known about the child or young person. This context will always involve the child or young person's family, peer group, school and the wider community in which they live. All of these areas need to be considered during an assessment as to whether risk is mitigated or exacerbated by one or more of these environments.

5.2 The Five Cs

- 5.3 The risks that children and young people face through their access to technology and use of social media generally manifest in the following areas:

Content: Inappropriate content that children and young people inadvertently gain access to. For example, adult pornography, or self-generated images created themselves and shared with peers

(sexting) or whilst being groomed or engaged by a sexual predator.

Conduct: Inappropriate behaviours enacted by others towards a child or young person or by the particular child or young person themselves. For example, **bullying**.

Contact: Children and other young users meeting individuals they don't actually know whilst online. For example, others who might be attempting to groom, **radicalise**, sexualise and **sexually exploit them**.

Commercialisation: The influences that access to online commercialised products and related advertising can have on children and young people. For example, the early normalisation of sexualised behaviour.

Communities: Communities of like-minded individuals with a similar interests in specific activities. For example, Online Gaming, coding or hacking. The pre-existing mutual interest in such activity often creates a strong sense of rapport and can facilitate or accelerate grooming under the guise of friendship.

5.4 Some risks are more common than others. Thankfully, comparatively few children will be engaged by an online predator; an individual who seeks to engage them in conversation, create a sense of friendship, intimacy or intimidation to lure a child to meet for sex or to convince them to become involved in inappropriate online sexual behavior.

5.5 The reality is that many children and young people are much more likely to suffer from online bullying or generate images of themselves (sexting), which may ultimately create a risk to their health and wellbeing. In many of the cases involving bullying or sexting via social media, this will involve the child or young person's peers

5.6 Cyberbullying

5.7 Bullying is repeated verbal, physical, social or psychological behaviour that is harmful and involves the misuse of power by an individual or group towards one or more persons. It can happen anywhere including: at school, travelling to and from school, in sporting teams, between neighbours or in the workplace. Bullying can involve humiliation, domination, intimidation, victimisation and all forms of harassment including that based on sex, race, disability, homosexuality or transgender. It can have long term effects on those involved, including bystanders.

5.8 Generally, bullying behavior is not about children not getting along well, a situation of mutual conflict, single episodes of nastiness or random acts of aggression and intimidation. It can be:

- Verbal - name calling, teasing, abuse, putdowns, sarcasm, insults, threats
- Physical - hitting, punching, kicking, scratching, tripping, spitting
- Social - ignoring, excluding, ostracising, alienating, making inappropriate gestures
- Psychological - spreading rumours, dirty looks, hiding or damaging possessions, malicious SMS and email messages, inappropriate use of camera phones.

5.9 Cyberbullying is an extension of bullying in the real world and refers to bullying through the use of information and communication technologies. Cyberbullying victims can be targeted via mobile phones or social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Neither technology nor social media

created cyberbullying, but the anonymity that the virtual environment can provide increases the opportunity for people to bully, intimidate, harass and upset others.

5.10 One of the aggravating factors of cyberbullying is that young people live simultaneously between the real and virtual worlds. There is no hiding place for them if they occupy the same online space as the bully. It is also much harder for a parent or carer, who is not part of their online life, to identify the early signs that their child is being bullied.

5.11 The warning signs or behaviour that suggests a child or young person is being bullied can be extremely subtle. As such, professionals, parents, carers, family and friends need to be sensitive to the early indicators and symptoms.

5.12 Sexting

5.13 Sexting has been defined as *“the creating, sharing, and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude, or nearly nude images”* (Lenhart, 2009). In simple terms, sexting is taking a sexually explicit photograph and texting (sharing) it via your mobile phone (or other device) to others.

5.14 This sexually explicit content can easily be distributed between people through the use of smartphones, the Internet, and online social networking sites.

5.15 Recent studies claim that up to 39% of teens and 59% of young adults have sexted at least once.

5.16 Whilst adults risk embarrassment if a photo they have sent to another adult is posted or shared with a wider audience, the implications for children and young people are much greater.

5.17 Children and young people need to understand the dangers that sexting can pose. Once an image has been sent, it is out of their control and may be

shared on and offline with other people. Images can be shared privately by text, Messenger, WhatsApp, ooVoo and a range of other Apps. They can be posed to social media sites such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram. Most social media sites have strict policies that prohibit nude photographs.

5.18 However, most are clear that their response to the posting of such images is 'reactive'. These sites rely on users reporting anything that may be a breach of their terms and conditions. When an image, especially a nude image is reported, social media sites normally will and most definitely should remove the content immediately.

5.19 Social media sites DO NOT proactively monitor all content that is posted on their platforms.

5.20 Some sites will block the user that has posted the content for a limited period. When an inappropriate image has been posted online, it is really important that the image is reported as soon as possible.

5.21 The quicker an inappropriate image is reported, the easier it is for those working in the Internet industry to take the image off their site and to do what they can to prevent or stop it spreading further.

5.22 The Law on Sexting

5.23 The law makes it an offence to take or share an indecent image of a child under 18. Therefore, a child or young person who takes an image of themselves and shares it technically commits a criminal offence.

5.24 The fact is, the police do not prosecute children who have made a simple error of judgment. For more information on police action in response to this issue click [HERE](#)

5.25 However, the mere fact that an incident may be investigated is likely to cause children and young people to worry and could be a deterrent to them coming

forward. If engaging with a child or young person who has shared an image, it is important to reassure them that all professionals, including the police, will simply want to help.

5.26 Think before you Speak

- 5.27 If you are speaking to children (individually or in groups) about the dangers of sharing images, **BE CAREFUL ABOUT WHAT YOU SAY**, and how you say it.
- 5.30 Telling a child or young person that once an image goes online, it stays online might seem like a strong message that will deter them from doing something risky but this is not always the case.
- 5.31 That type of message can be detrimental to a child's health and wellbeing as they may think there is no point in seeking help, as they've been told nothing can be done.
- 5.32 Always think about the impact of what you say and be careful not to say anything to take away the hope that a child may be clinging to that something can in fact be done to help. The sooner a child tells someone about what they have done or what has happened, the sooner steps can be taken to recover the image, prevent further circulation and in many cases make it extremely difficult if not impossible to find.
- 5.33 Sexting can lead to serious mental health issues caused by the fear of what might happen - leading to depression and a desperation that drives young people to self-harm or to contemplate suicide.
- 5.34 A suicide prevention strategy as part of any risk assessment or plan should always be considered in such cases, even if the child appears to be coping well.**

5.35 In many cases, early intervention by parents, carers or professionals can prevent an image that a child has shared via text or WhatsApp from going into wider circulation.

5.36 Furthermore, sites like Facebook, Twitter and Google can often remove explicit images of children and young people or prevent the images spreading further. In some cases, they can make it much more difficult for 'reported' images to be found.

5.37 The key is EARLY reporting that an image has been shared and EARLY intervention to remove or hide it online.

5.38 Exploitation – CSE, Radicalisation and Gangs

5.39 Children use smart phones to engage and communicate routinely via social media. They chat (text) share items of interest on news feeds, generate and share images of themselves and their friends. They form communities and join communities of interest. The vast majority of this activity will be innocent.

5.40 However, a child who is engaged by individuals who attempt to manipulate, control and exploit them and the predators themselves will almost invariably have some evidence of that process (and/or the 'Friendship' group that represents the threat) on their device (camera role, messages and Apps, including Decoy Apps).

5.41 Risks concerning CSE, radicalisation and/or gang involvement will also normally be evident within the digital footprint generated by children and young people through their use of social media.

6. Assessing and Managing Risk

6.1 Partner agencies in Bromley work together to effectively assess the needs of children who may benefit from early help services or who require statutory

intervention by Children's Social Care under the Children Act 1989. These arrangements are set out in detail in the [BSCB Thresholds of Need Guidance](#).

- 6.2 The purpose of any assessment is to piece together a clear picture of the family's current situation by gathering information from other professionals, as well as the family and the child themselves. This information is used to assess risks and needs and to develop hypotheses, test out interventions and create plans for change.
- 6.3 Whilst the type of assessment undertaken will depend upon the level and nature of potential need and/or risk, the BSCB is clear that there should always be active consideration to include a child or young person's access to technology and use of social media as part of this process.**
- 6.4 Social Media platforms can provide insight into the lifestyle of a child or young person for example, a profile picture that is highly sexualized, a large number of older men with few mutual friends, a recent surge in radical propaganda posts, cover photos of illegal substances or belonging to pro-Ana¹ or self-harm groups.
- 6.5 All of these examples can aid in the assessment and analysis of potential harm. This information is not to be seen on its own but in conjunction with other sources of information as part of a comprehensive assessment. Key risk factors in a family such as social isolation, neglect, domestic violence, should always prompt a deeper analysis of the family's online presence and digital footprint.
- 6.6 If you identify any information that indicates a child may be in immediate risk of significant harm you must inform the police without delay.**

¹ Pro-Anorexia

6.7 Safeguarding in the Context of Criminal Justice Responses

6.8 Consideration should always be given to identifying the individuals who represent a risk to children. They will often have images of the children they groom on their devices or social networks. It is important to remember that some of these individuals may well be children themselves.

7. Keeping up with the Technology

7.1 The virtual environment adds a layer of complexity for seeing, hearing and helping children who simultaneously occupy offline and online spaces. Today's professionals need to keep up to date with new and emerging social networking sites like Kik, ooVoo, YikYak and Askfm. They need to have both confidence and competence in how to use social media appropriately and have access to contemporary training opportunities.

7.2 Learning through Experience

7.3 Professionals working with children can develop a credible understanding of the social media/networking process by participation in its use. This will help develop a better understanding regarding the depth, breadth and scope of its application, as well as emerging trends amongst young users.

7.4 It is important however for this participation to be undertaken within a framework that ensures use is appropriate and does not compromise a professional's role in terms of their responsibilities to safeguard children and young people or their employment.

7.5 The BSCB has developed a set of guidelines to assist professionals engage responsibly with social media when used in a personal capacity. The BSCB **Appropriate Use of Social Media (AUSM)** principles are appended in this handbook and should be read alongside existing organisational policies

7.6 Continuous Professional Development

- 7.7 The BSCB will provide professionals with an opportunity to participate in specific offline and online training to develop their knowledge in this important area.
- 7.8 Alongside formal training, all professionals are encouraged to make use of the potential for continuous professional development through social media. For example, accessing learning resources, online discussions and sharing information with those with similar professional interests.
- 7.9 Social media itself can provide a platform to stay up to date with developments in safeguarding and related professions.
- 7.10 Through the use of Twitter, professionals can easily follow other professionals, where many “tweet” new and recent research. In this way social media aids in the commitment to evidence based practice.

7.11 The BSCB has a twitter account which can be accessed @BromleyLSCB

- 7.12 Professionals should be competent in using social media to enable them to navigate this continually changing area of practice. Learning about social media should therefore be a continual process that is reviewed regularly.
- 7.13 Competency in social media will help professionals develop a contemporary and credible understanding regarding safer by design functions, such as Muting, Blocking and Reporting. When working directly with children and young people, this knowledge will provide an additional tool by which they can be helped to stay safer.

8. Strategic Priorities

- 8.1 The BSCB understands the need to place this strategy in the context of other plans that influence the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. As such, it is essential that safeguarding children in the context of their access to technology and use of social media forms part of ongoing dialogue and

scrutiny at key strategic forums; ensuring everyone is playing their part in dealing with this issue. It will also involve ongoing dialogue with relevant groups representing local communities across both areas.

- 8.2 The following strategic priorities, informed by local issues and self-assessment, provide the focus for further developing our local arrangements. An action plan covering the Bromley has been developed against these strategic priorities.

Priority 1: Leadership

This strategic priority reflects the need for strong leadership that ensures contemporary safeguarding practice actively considers a child or young person's access to technology and use of social media as appropriate. This leadership is required from all levels, but particularly from those at the top. Supporting this priority will be a focus on practitioners having a single point of contact within their agency to seek advice / guidance. The learning needs of frontline practitioners will also be understood by the BSCB and actions taken to raise awareness and knowledge in this area. The BSCB will also focus on ensuring that all professionals maintain an appropriate use of social media in their personal and professional contacts.

Priority 2: Improving Practice

This strategic priority has a focus on ensuring practitioners have access to a range of tools that assist them in completing accurate assessments that identify risk and action required to safeguard children and young people.

Priority 3: Raising Awareness

This priority will seek to address how professionals in the multi-agency network have a heightened awareness of how children and young people access technology and use social media – and understand the risks that can face young people as a result. Similarly, it will focus upon educating and empowering children and young people so that they understand the risks of technology and use of social media and can identify risky situations that may expose them to harm.

Priority 4: Training and Development

A priority on training and development will seek to enhance the knowledge, skills and experience of practitioners in this subject area so they are able to better safeguard children and young people as a result.

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