



Birchwood Community High School

Birchwood Community High School
Brock Road, Birchwood,
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www.birchwoodhigh.org



EMWL24.6.24

Dear Parent/Carer,

Thank you to everyone who attended our presentations and for those of you that could not make it, hopefully this letter will be useful.

Disconnect to Reconnect: The future is in our children's hands which is why phones shouldn't be.

With the prevalence of smartphones and social media, our children are increasingly exposed to various risks such as online predators, inappropriate content, and excessive screen time. I have watched this unfold over the last 22 years in education and the impact it is having on a generation of children is significant. We know that there is a mental health crisis nationally for young people; in part this is due to the pandemic, but I firmly believe that big contributors to this are also smartphones and social media.

We want to highlight to parents/carers the risks of online predators, the accessibility of inappropriate or harmful content, and the negative impacts of excessive screen time on our children's well-being and development. Essentially though, we want to introduce potential solutions to tackle these issues and offer you support, including Qustodio and the Ontaro app. These resources offer tools and support to help parents monitor and manage their children's online activities, ensuring a safer and healthier digital environment for our families. Most issues that occur due to phones/social media happen outside of school time which is why we want to work together with you to support the young people in Warrington focusing on the importance of safeguarding our children's future by promoting responsible and balanced technology use.

Our campaign is to try and get as many parents as possible to pledge that their child will not have social media until 13 (the legal age to have social media), and to have some level of parental controls on the phone until 16. We don't think taking phones away completely is the answer, we believe that parents should hold the hand of their child in the digital world so they learn to navigate in sensibly and safely, so that when they are 16, they are able to do so independently.

The **Ontaro app** is aimed at older children, those who have social media. It is an app that is added to your child's phone that you set up and it feeds through to a dashboard on your phone. It is an AI based app that reads all of their activity across all apps on the phone and alerts you when something concerning comes up – not only does it alert you but it offers advice and guidance on what to do next. For instance, if your child is googling about dieting, then it would make you aware. This allows your child to start to navigate the online world more but with you holding their hand and ensuring they are safe. The Ontaro app should be £100 a year but we have a discount code for our campaign that you can use that offers you this for free. The code is **BCHS12MF** – be aware that this app currently only works on Android phones. More information can be found here: <https://www.ontaro.co.uk/>

For children who use IOS and have social media, then **the Qustodio app** can be a great option. It has web filtering and blocking, apps blocking and time limits, social media limits, restricted times, calls and SMS monitoring, location tracking and much more. The basic package to go on one device is free – but you can pay for packages with more safety measures and that can go on numerous devices including laptops, iPad etc. We have a discount code for our campaign that you can use which is **DISCONNECT10**. More information can be found here: <https://www.qustodio.com>



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We know that there is power in number which is why we are asking Warrington parents to Pledge to Protect. We want as many of you as possible to pledge that your child won't have access to social media until they are 13 and pledge to have parental controls on your child's phone until 16. We are not selling these products or on commission, and there are plenty more on the market – we are just highlighting the type of things that are out there. As a school, we cannot be responsible for what our students do on their phones out of school hours. We are always happy to support and educate students, and we will always work with social care and the police if needed. But what happens on phones/social media/internet out of school hours is the responsibility of parents. That is why it is so important that you do know what your child is doing online, which these parental control apps allow you to do. It opens up conversation between you and your child about what they are doing, and hopefully allows them to access the online world in a safe way.

Please click here to pledge if you agree with the values of our campaign. The more people that sign up, the more power we have when we approach public health to ask for parental control apps to be subsidised:

<https://forms.office.com/e/P6YncnkhED>

And, if you are interested in following our campaign, you can do so here:

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61559178036913>

In terms of within school from September,

- Mobile phones will not be allowed on school site unless your child has a Yondr pouch to keep it secure during the school day. The government have said that all schools should be banning phones on site from September, and we have worked hard to try and find a solution that is reasonable.
- The Yondr pouches cost £25, and they last for the full time at high school – we are subsidising the cost for some of the older year groups that don't have as much time left in school (e.g. for current year 10 we are charging £10).
- Students will be put their phones in the pouch of a morning on the way into school (there will be checks done). On the way out of school, there will be lots of staff and devices as students exit that can release the pouches and the phone can be accessed once again. This means students can keep their phones on them in school, but they cannot access them.
- If a child needs to access their phone in an emergency, they can go to any of the staff offices in school and ask for their pouch to be opened. If you need to contact your child in an emergency, you can contact the school – this is no different to now as students are not allowed to have their phone switched on or to use it during the school day anyway.
- If your child does not have pouch, then they cannot bring their phone onto school site – we will have measures in place for anyone who has a pouch but forgets to bring it one day, we know that children can be forgetful sometimes. We will also discuss with parents of any child with medical needs or SEND that may need access to their phone, or who will struggle to remember their pouch each day (e.g. ADHD). The sanction for bringing a mobile phone on site intentionally without a pouch will be an automatic internal exclusion.



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If there are financial reasons as to why you cannot purchase a pouch, then please do get in touch. They are now available to buy on ParentPay (thank you to everyone who has purchased them already!) and we ask that you purchase them before September so we can give them out on the first day back.

We are speaking to students this week to explain why we are doing this – it is part of a wider mental health and wellbeing campaign that we have been working on as a school. We know that phones bring with them a certain amount of stress – has someone messaged me, has anyone liked my last post, what is happening on Snap Chat, has anyone replied in the WhatsApp group. Without even meaning to, anyone can be subconsciously distracted. This happens to adults, so it is no wonder it happens to children. We have very mature students here at Birchwood, and many have articulated to us how they can see how they are distracted by their phones, and they understand how we are trying to help and support them. We want students to be fully present in school and to be able to enjoy everything that school has to offer – childhood does not last that long and helping them to enjoy it fully is important to us.

I also think it is important that I say too, that this campaign has made us fully reflect on other practices we have in school. We have concluded that too much work is set online for students, especially homework. I will send a separate letter this week that outlines our new policy on homework for next year. Recommended screen time for teenagers is 2 hours a day, that is including gaming, socialising and work – so we are very mindful of this moving forward. On that note, I would also ask you to seriously consider the data plans that your child has. Unlimited data is unlimited risk – if your child should only be on a screen for 2 hours a day, please think about how much data they actually need. Especially if you have broadband at home, that means the data they have is only for use when they are away from home and school.

We know there have been a few parents who have been unsure as to why we are bringing in this measure, and some confusion over cost etc, but hopefully this clears any questions up. Please get in touch if there is anything you would still like to ask. Your participation and engagement would be appreciated so we can ensure that we are giving our children every chance and every support that they need to have a happy and healthy future. As a community, we have experienced a lot of loss and tragedy in recent years, and we want to be proactive in making sure that we can keep children as safe as possible.

I would also like to remind you that this Friday is Independent Learning Day. School is closed to students for staff training. Students have the opportunity to use the day to catch-up on any work/homework that they need to before the end of the year or to focus on their wellbeing.

Thank you for your support.
Best wishes and take care,

Emma Mills
Headteacher, Birchwood Community High School