Information Technology Advice for Parents

Our **Online Safety webpage** provides a selection of the most useful and authoritative web sites offering guidance for parents, children and young people about keeping safe online.

This document provides more general advice for parents on approaching Information Technology within the home and in their child's lives.

For the purposes of this document Information Technology refers to the variety of electronic digital devices commonly found in the home for seeking and accessing information, and for communicating with others. This includes desktops and laptop computers, mobile phones, tablets, e-book readers, 'smart' (internet enabled) televisions and 'smart' watches.

While some believe Steiner schools are anti-technology, that is actually not the case. Steiner Schools simply believe ICT can wait, at which point it can be used as a tool - for research, creation and construction.

A familiarity with all the technologies that surround us and influence our lives is an essential part of a complete education. Through the whole of the Steiner Waldorf curriculum everything has a right time and place to be brought to the developing child. In Steiner Schools computers are generally used by students at secondary age and not earlier. They very quickly master the necessary ICT skills and many go on to successful careers in the computer, film and TV industries.

There is growing evidence, however, that too much 'screen time' is detrimental to children and Steiner schools do not shy away from engaging in critical debate about the appropriate use of computers, TV and DVD. These are embedded in our culture and taken for granted to such a degree that it is often difficult for us to question their value. Research continues to show that screen-based activity can have a negative effect on children (brain activity, concentration, heart-beat, emotional balance and well-being).

The majority of the time we, as a society, are extremely unaware of how sensitive and open children are. They absorb everything from the environment around them and recreate it in their play and work.

We have found that images and characters from the screen can dominate children's play, work and conversation to a degree that disrupts the kind of education we are trying to bring them. Therefore we ask that:

- parents limit their children's exposure to unsuitable and unmonitored access to media such as television, cinema, DVDs, computers and console games, iPad, internet websites, chat rooms and social media
- all children have no screen time in the morning before school, and recommend that children have no screen time on evenings where there is school the next day.
- we also recommend that TVs, computers and screen based devices are not kept in your child's room so that their bedroom is free to be a place of rest and comfort

Cardiff Steiner School recognises that information technology has value for adolescents, both in their personal and social lives and for academic purposes. We also recognise that most pupils have access to this technology at home and in other locations, from a reasonably young age.

We seek to support and advise pupils and their parents on how best to harness information technology, and this means also offering advice as to the dangers and drawbacks of the technologies.

The benefits we recognise in Information Technology

- Ready access to a wealth of information relevant to their studies and their personal interests.
- The ability to collect and collate information, and draft and finally present that information in a range of forms for a variety of academic purposes.
- Digital skills including digital citizenship
- The opportunity to communicate with friends and family, some of whom may live at a distance, including through visual and audio-visual materials.
- The chance to easily read news items and follow current affairs; to engage in matters affecting our community and the wider world.
- The opportunity to access readily a wide range of cultural material: film and television, including drama and documentaries, artworks, music, and literature.

The dangers and drawbacks of these technologies

- Unfiltered access to the Internet gives access to a wide range of unhealthy and troubling materials.

There are websites and other resources that present or promote pornography, abuse, discrimination, intolerance, violence, self-harm, and a range of other unhealthy and antisocial matters.

- Information found on the Internet is not always reliable, balanced or complete. Any Internet user must take note of the origin of the Internet resource and consider its credentials.

- There are health and possibly psychological dangers in excessive use of these technologies. Spending long periods of time in front of a screen, moving little yet making repeated small movements, for example, of the hand, is unhealthy and can lead to, for example, back and neck strain, eyestrain and, in extreme cases, repetitive strain injury (RSI).

- Such sedentary activities should be balanced with ensuring the child or adolescent does physical exercise out of doors, for example walking, cycling, swimming or organised sports and games.

- As many IT based activities are essentially solitary, for example many computer games, this needs to be balanced with consciously ensuring the child or adolescent takes part in activities with other people.

- Use of screen- based technologies shortly before sleep will often result in impoverished sleep, and over time a build-up of fatigue.

- Social networking and other forms of person-to-person and group communication have distinct dangers. One does not know for sure with whom one is actually communicating, and what their true intentions are. One should proceed with caution when revealing any information about oneself on line. There are persons on line whose intentions are unhealthy or malevolent. Most social networking systems have the option to report any inappropriate content, and this function should be used.

- Information, pictures, audio and video posted online must be treated as if it will for ever be online. It is almost impossible in any complete sense to permanently remove all traces of a post you wish you had not made. Such ill-advised posts may, further into the future, be of disadvantage or harm - for example when applying for a job.

- There are laws that apply to material posted on line. Posting material which is offensive, discriminatory, or appears to incite violence, intolerance or abuse may lead to intervention by the police.

- Critical, unkind or spiteful communications made through social networking, blogs, or directly through mobile phones, are a form of abuse. The school takes a very serious view of anything it would regard as "cyber-bullying", and reserves the right to seek Police intervention in any instances of such behaviour. Any pupil concerned about cyber-bullying should share their concerns promptly with their parents or another relevant adult.

- The use of such technologies can in some cases lead to manipulation and the abuse of what has begun as a legitimate relationship. The sending of inappropriate images or videos, often referred to as "sexting", is a case in point.

- As with any area in life, where a child or adolescent is experiencing problems or anxieties arising from their use of information technology, they should share their concerns with their parents or another relevant adult and seek assistance promptly.

Some advice for parents on how to manage children's use of Information Technology

- Be proactive. Be open with your children, in an age-appropriate way, about the risks and dangers of Information Technology, the Internet and social networking in particular, and how to avoid them.
- Ensure that your home internet connection has a 'family filter' correctly set up. This means that all internet traffic coming into your home is filtered against unsuitable content. Usually the filtering is further adjustable by you the parent (guard your password carefully), and allows you to add or remove particular types of content or specifically named websites. Contact your Internet provider if you are unsure about this. Similar filtering is available for mobile phones too, especially relevant in the age of the Internet-enabled smartphone. Contact your mobile provider for further information.
- Children and adolescents need to know that some web sources are inherently more reliable than others. Just because a website has material about a particular topic they want to know about, does not mean that the material presented is necessarily correct, complete or without bias (intentional or otherwise). We may say, for example, that the website of an organisation such as the BBC or a University or a public body is likely to be reliable. A blog or other informal site may well be far less reliable or trustworthy. In some cases it may be helpful to cross-check facts and figures by looking on other sites. Teach them: do not take everything at face value, especially if it doesn't ring true to you. If unsure, ask an adult.
- Discuss with your child the physical effects of long periods spent at a keyboard/mouse/game controller, in front of a screen, or crouched over the tiny display of their mobile phone. Talk about back and neck strain, eyestrain and repetitive strain injury. Make sure they are aware of the need to take a break regularly, even if what they are doing is their (must-be-in-for-tomorrow) homework.
- Try to ensure your child has a break from any screen-based activity well before bed-time. Explain that a number of scientific studies suggest use of screen-based technologies shortly before sleep can result in impoverished sleep, and over time a build-up of fatigue.
- Discuss with your child the necessary balance between sedentary activities, and the need for physical exercise. Try to monitor the balance of activities in your child's life – it can be easy, when

we as parents are very busy, for them to spend long periods at the computer unnoticed.

- Discuss with your child the necessary balance between solitary activities, and the need to interact with others face to face. Suggest to them that even with video-messaging like Skype/Facetime virtual communications have a quite different quality from those in the real world. Encourage your child to spend "real time" with their friends. Suggest they invite friends to dinner or for a sleep-over, and keep family relationships strong by spending quality time together – and by simply making yourself available to listen and talk. Don't allow smart phones at the dinner table; instead model meal-time conversation and do your best to keep your child engaged.

- Make sure your child uses all the appropriate security settings for their social media interactions. Make sure they are aware of what privacy settings are available, and explain to them why it is important only to release a minimum of information out to the Internet as a whole. For further information search online for "privacy settings" related to that social media platform. Suggest to your child that social media 'friends' are not necessarily the same as real friends and that they should not allow them the same insights into their life as they give their real-world. Suggest that the quest to acquire more friends than others is a somewhat fruitless one.

- Connect with your child on the social media they use. If they are not very enthusiastic about this idea, point out that it could be a fun way to share photos, posts, and memories with cousins, grandparents, and other relatives.

- Explain to them the permanence of information put out on the internet. There are many examples to be found of people who regretted later what they had posted when they were much younger.

- Make them aware that cyber-bullying can happen. Encourage them to speak with you at the earliest opportunity if they have any sense that they are being teased or treated unpleasantly by others in an online community. Make sure they know that not only you but Cardiff Steiner School, and also the police take a very dim view of any form of cyber-bullying. Make it clear to them that the threats made by the typical bully about what will happen if they inform others almost always come to nothing, and that the bully cannot be dealt with unless they tell and adult what is happening.

- Set (and enforce) reasonable rules and restrictions on your child's use of online technology. For example, don't allow them to use their laptop computer in her bedroom, out of your sight and supervision, or as an alternative set a rule that the door is always open while they are using it. Just knowing you might walk by at any time may motivate them to be more mindful of the house rules.