Social Media use at home:

In 2021, our children suffered significant disruption to both their academic learning and their social and emotional learning due to frequent lockdowns and remote learning. Out of necessity, many children and families used online social media tools as one way for providing access to continue friendships and social groups. Unfortunately, we have seen the negative impact many of these tools have, particularly for primary school students. Our responsibility as a school means we need to provide families and our children with responsible, appropriate advice they can use as part of their decision making process when thinking about social media use at home.

This advice is based on several workshops we ran with experts such as 'Project Rockit', 'bullystoppers' and in colsutation with advice from DET and the Esafety commission. We know there is a huge amount of information out there for families, and at times, some of the advice can be contradictory and unclear. We ran eight workshops with Grade 5/6 over Term 4 in 2021 to build knowledge and awareness of social media use before arriving at our position that social media use for primary school aged children is unhelpful and potential dangerous.

What tools/apps are we seeing students use?
Students at home are accessing a variety of online tools include: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Messenger (product of Facebook).
Many of these tools are popular because communication is instantaneous, centred around 'fun', and they are intuitive to use.

What challenges have we seen with the use of these tools?
All of these tools require a minimum sign-in 'age' of 13 years. This is in response to law-makers in the USA who set the parameters around legality of use, not in response to the 'age-appropriateness' of these tools.

The tools are all centred around algorithms that build 'dependence' and regular use of the apps that can lead to addiction. In many cases, additictve properties are strategically developed in to the app to increase our hormonal responses through 'dopamine' fixes.
Several examples of these include:
- Instagram 'releasing' volumes of likes at different rates to impact on dopamine 'hits'. This practice was stopped and likes only seen by the poster in response to the significant impact this was having on wellbeing and anxiety around 'like' competition.
- Snapchat boasts almost instantaneous responses through video and messaging that increases reliance, dependence and regular checkin in on posts and 'snaps'.
- Tiktok video responses challenges can be incredibly fast and easy to post, therefore increasing the amount of time people spend creating and responding to videos.
- Notification sounds, vibrations and 'pings' across devices increase anxiety and dependence for young people because they can become fixated on notifications- very difficult to 'respond later'.

These apps are designed to keep people 'on' the apps. Instantaneous responses are designed to enable users to send feedback quickly and easily. We see how this can be a fun function however whilst young people (under 13) are still developing self-control, we see these instrusive features as incredibly dangerous for the precedence they set around app dependence.

Video-based apps (TikTok and Snapchat) do not set age-related content filters. TikTok and Snapchat are open platforms where children access a huge variety of content, much of which is inappropriate for primary school aged children. Swearing, sexualised content, graphic violence, dangerous and illegal pranks, socially irresponsible acts and behaviour are all accessible and readily available for any user.

Problems we see with these apps for primary school children extend well beyond the functionality of the apps and relate more to our development. These tools prey on developing brains by increasing not only dependence on the tools through these features, but also the way these tools can be manipulated.

We see and know children in primary school struggle to grapple with not only the exposure to inappropriate content, but responses to the content that spiral further into inappropriate and dangerous content.

Social exclusion- Many features in the apps reinforce social exclusion habits:- video challenges in TikTok are often risky and enter into increasingly inappropriate territory. These challenges often encourage users to respond with lists of content of likes/dislikes/hates/someone who annoys me/ someone I find sexy/ my crush/ etc…. When posted, these videos leave a huge digital footprint of social inclusion/exclusion/popularity etc that is very difficult to manage and keep track of.
We have seen many examples where children might engage in conversations with one 'private' group, photograph the private conversations and share with other children who have been the subject of the conversation.

Response times- The nature of these apps means that children can very quickly respond to content, without having the support and guidance they need to work through conflict appropriately. The nature of the online world is that children feel more empowered to respond inappropriately behind a screen than they would in person.
Some of the tools also boast features that mean posts are viewed as temporary. For example, Snapchat photos and some conversations 'disappear' after a very short period of time. This false security means children post inappropriate, risky content without the understanding that other users might take a screenshot or use another device to record the content.

Manipulation of content:
We have seen examples where children have manipulated conversations with others so that conversations threads do not include all the relevant and important information. Some children have deleted comments so that comments they make that are antagonistic, nasty, offensive do not appear in screenshots as 'evidence' of discussion.

After our eight week block of learning, it was clear that many of the challenges our young people face around identity and inclusion, are made even more difficult in an online world that is designed to keep people on devices by rewarding online time. Many apps feature similar features to poker machines to keep children on screens, creating not only a dangerous neurological connection, but take advantage of many skills and dispositions our primary school aged children have not yet developed.

Many primary school aged children struggle to understand the implications of posting content online. We see problematic issues arise relating to: posting, sharing, liking, forwarding inappropriate content, recognising and engaging in content that is socially exclusive, sharing personal information, understanding the impact of content on others and accessing content not suitable for children of primary school age. Despite parent guidance and support, and targeted and structured learning at school, in the heat of the moment, with the pressure to feel included, and with the tools to do so almost instantaneously, children find it very difficult to make rational, considered and informed decisions. In fact, many of the tools are designed to limit such thinking.
We do not encourage social media use for children of primary school age. Whilst we recognise the limited scope we have for influencing change and improvement, we do feel that we have a responsibility to present our perspective on why accessing and engaging in social media can often have a destructive consequence for those online. We feel the ramifications at school, trying to work through friendship and peer conflict that occurs outside of school, and we are limited in how we can respond to these events due to the nature of sharing personal and private information.

We hope this information can support families to make an informed decision about the use of social media at home.

More information on social media use can be found at:

https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents

https://www.esafety.gov.au/kids

https://kidshelpline.com.au/kids

https://au.reachout.com/bullying/cyberbullying