

# #Teacherstoo: Parents and students using social media to harass teachers

Moving away from school playground exchanges, parents and pupils are increasingly hiding behind social media platforms to criticise or send abuse to teaching staff. New research from Ecclesiastical reveals almost a third of teachers (29%) have been contacted by parents through a social media channel and, of those, a third (31%) believed that a parent had tried to intimidate them using social media.<sup>1</sup>



Well documented, 'cyber bullying' is no longer the exclusive domain of pupil on pupil exchange, but today can subject teachers to public criticism from parents, or groups of parents, as well as pupils themselves. With the proliferation of social networking platforms, our research looks at the emerging issue of criticism via social media and the potential impact it can have on the mental health of teachers.

## Social media – good or bad?

Social media can be used to an advantage in an educational context by building a sense of pride in pupils through showcasing great pupil group projects, for example. Increasingly though, the negative side of social media is gaining more attention as the technologically savvy use it to replace traditional forms of parent/teacher or pupil/teacher communication. In our survey, teaching professionals from across the UK revealed that they are receiving criticism at a personal and professional level from parents and students on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp including criticism of the school, a teaching colleague, or the teacher themselves. A worrying extension of this trend is cyber-baiting, where a student baits a teacher to overreact in a classroom setting, and then video the reaction before posting it online in an attempt to embarrass or humiliate the teacher.

### Some common social media platforms that can be used for inappropriate online communications are:

Facebook		Rate My Teacher	
Messenger groups		Instagram	
Twitter		YouTube	
WhatsApp groups		Class Dojo	

## Unprecedented pressure on teachers

These behaviours come at a time when teachers have never been more pressured; teaching unions warn of an epidemic of stress, with higher than ever numbers of teachers signed off on long term sick leave because of pressure of work, anxiety or mental illness.

Ecclesiastical Education Director Faith Kitchen agrees: "The way parents interact with teachers is changing. Social media gives parents instant, 24-hour access to teachers and, while increasing dialogue between parents and teachers can be positive, social media removes the formality and structure of traditional parent/teacher relationships. Our research shows that this can leave teachers open to abuse and criticism that they probably would not receive in a face to face meeting."

More than half the teachers in our survey agreed that social media makes it easy for parents and students to bully teachers and over 40% said that social media increases bad behaviour towards teachers from students and parents.

## So what can teachers do in this situation?

In general however, teachers do feel protected by the institutions they work for. Almost three quarters (72%) in our survey agreed that their school would support them if they were negatively targeted on social media, and 70% believed that action would be taken if they reported such behaviour. However nearly half of teachers said their organisation did not have a social media policy or, if they did, they were not aware of it.

41%

of teachers said that their organisation did not have a social media policy.<sup>1</sup>

### Taking action – a teacher's checklist

- ✓ Be aware of your school's social media policy, if applicable.
- ✓ Always keep a copy of what is being said, or pictures/videos being used. Screenshots can provide evidence even after a post is deleted.
- ✓ Record as much detail as possible: subject, time, date, individuals involved.
- ✓ Follow school procedures for reporting issues.
- ✓ Helplines can offer emotional support where needed.



## What can schools do?

Developing a social media policy or code of conduct should be a high priority and there are on-line resources to help with this. Whilst not legally binding, a carefully worded policy can clearly outline the behavioural expectations of staff, parents and children in regard to social media and detail any consequential paths of action that follow a cyber-bullying or cyber-baiting incident.

Faith Kitchen added; "It is important that there is a robust process in place for dealing with this type of incident because if the issue is not dealt with correctly, the school could suffer reputational consequences. There is free guidance available online for schools, teachers and parents on how to handle cyber-bullying, which includes training and staff development, prevention strategies and 'a whole school' approach."

## Accessing advice and support

- SWGfL offer [online safety policy templates](#), including a social media policy, for schools and are acknowledged as good practice documents.
- UK Safer Internet Centre offer [social media advice for teachers](#) and advice on how [teachers can protect their reputation](#) plus a dedicated helpline: <https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/professionals-online-safety-helpline>

## Is legal recourse the answer?

### Ed Henderson, partner at law firm Lee Bolton Monier-Williams added:

"We have experienced an increasing frequency of schools and trusts asking us about parents waging social media campaigns and generally stirring up others via WhatsApp or Facebook groups. We recommend starting with the school's complaints procedure; identifying a particular person within the school who the parent can communicate with (removing the teacher from the exchange) and, as a last resort, asking a solicitor to write to parents on behalf of the school advising them that their words may be verging on harassment and/or defamation; usually a solicitor's letter has a significant effect. It is important to document and evidence the steps that were taken in the same way you would for any other complaint."

At Ecclesiastical, as a specialist education insurer, we acknowledge that the mental well-being of teachers is a big concern for the sector and, as one of the pressures on teachers, the impact of 24/7 contact via social media had not been fully explored.

Our research clearly highlights the extent of the issue, as we remain committed to discussing contemporary topics that affect the sectors in which we operate. Our counselling helpline service is available 24/7 to our policyholders to discuss such issues such as stress, health, anxiety, relationships, depression or bereavement by calling 0345-266-9667.

1. Research was undertaken by OnePoll on behalf of Ecclesiastical Insurance. 250 teachers were surveyed anonymously in October 2018.

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