

HYDESVILLE TOWER SCHOOL

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"Please, Mr President, think before you tweet," urges Mr Warren Honey, Headmaster at Hydesville Tower School, Walsall.

This next blog piece was supposed to be considering hormones and the brains of children. And then Trump re-tweeted far-right propaganda. That ripped up my planned script, and left me reflecting on how the most powerful person on the planet can make an error that would be inexcusable from a child. The fact that his subsequent messages (280 characters or fewer) offered no sense of shame, embarrassment or apology only added to the feeling that causing offence and outrage was a desired outcome.

Causing upset by social media is not a new phenomenon. When Facebook first emerged, I dealt with an incident almost every fortnight when one child would write something derogatory on another's "wall". Much was written at the time about why such cyber-abuse, which would often lead to cyber-bullying, would be occurring amongst people who were so normal and understated in usual circumstances. Daniel Goleman wrote about 'Emotional Intelligence', and the ease with which a person could distance themselves from their reasoned empathy when facing a computer: typing those harsh words about another was easier since there was no apparent victim, no visual clues as to the damage being done. Gradually, as the years went by and the stand taken against online abuse became clear, the number of cases to deal with diminished: was the problem disappearing?

Sadly, the evidence would suggest not. As mobile phone technology advanced, and the availability of smartphones increased, there was greater accessibility to social media accounts. Now children could access their platforms throughout the day, on their way to and from school, as well as when at home. This 24/7 exposure coincided with an unfortunate phenomenon: the normalisation of more nasty posts in the minds of the users. Thus, exchanges between friends became increasingly cutting (but tolerated as "banter"), and reports of genuinely unpleasant messages decreased with a sighing acceptance of inevitability. Since the human brain's development is rarely complete before 26 years old, and the emotional centres are amongst the last to mature, it is little wonder that mistakes are made by adolescents; nor is it surprising that the damage is especially significant to those on the receiving end. As the frontal cortex re-wires itself, all of the capacity to reason, to empathise, to reflect and to call a halt on a spat is diminished. Given Donald Trump is 71, he is a hop, skip and a jump beyond using this as his excuse, however...his retorts and spiteful comments seem hard-wired!

School and family play a vital part in trying to mitigate against the concerns of social media, and both are integral in the effort of enhancing the related protective factors of thoughtfulness, empathy and self-esteem. According to the 'Ditch The Label' survey of 2017, 69% of pupils sampled admitted to posting something hurtful online. Helping children to develop self-assurance without arrogance can play a big part in reducing the chance of them engaging in such unpleasantries: bullies are often acting out of a deficiency in their own self-image. At Hydesville

Tower School, we benefit from PSHE sessions delivered in small form groups and teachers who work hard to understand the child's personality and so give them the chance to develop the strength of character. Families can play a similar key role, with that environment that nurtures the child and gives the strong bonds that reside between relatives and helps a child feel loved.

As a member of Cognita Schools, character development is a key focus. Pupils have huge scope to develop this quality - presenting assemblies, leading House teams, engaging in Forest School and outdoor education, or by working on community projects – and it is grounded in what matters: making the most of self, the people around you, and the local and global communities.

The 'Ditch The Label' survey found that 37% of children never told anyone when they were bullied. It is difficult if a child chooses not to reveal, but this is where the home-school partnership can be so powerful. Together, we will notice if there are changes of behaviour and mood, so there is a chance for us to be proactive. Communicating concerns will allow the other party to add their support and hence extend the protective cushion around the child. In 2018, we will be launching the 'Hydesville Champions' – pupils who will look out for indicators that others are feeling unhappy, to increase further our chance to help them through the situation.

It is too early for New Year's Resolutions, but I need to do this for myself. I will not include Donald Trump in my next missive...he is "blogbait" for me, and I need a detox!