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**Mental Health Update**

Dear School Families,

As we near the two-year mark of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are pleased that based on recent data an end may be in sight, but we realize that our school community will be dealing with the after effects of this event on our students for some time to come. The pandemic was an unexpected event out of our control that has caused worry and fear for many youth. This is considered traumatic stress. RCPS has been providing training for staff in Trauma Informed Practices and Youth Mental Health First Aid for several years and is committed to continuing to support our staff in providing education that supports the whole child. It is imperative that we work together with our parents/guardians to ensure that our students’ mental health needs are supported.

**Warning signs that your child may have a mental health disorder include:**

* Persistent sadness — two or more weeks.
* Withdrawing from or avoiding social interactions.
* Hurting oneself or talking about hurting oneself.
* Talking about death or suicide.
* Outbursts or extreme irritability.
* Out-of-control behavior that can be harmful.

**Impacts of Social Media**

Our children have been encouraged to embrace technology during this time to complete their education and keep in contact with friends. This uptick in overall screen time, however, can have negative impacts on social emotional health including a reluctance for in-person contact, feeling rewarded by social media “likes”, and a dependency on technology for self- esteem. “While mindful (and regulated) use of digital devices is linked with well-being, **excessive screen time is reported to be associated with a range of negative mental health outcomes such as psychological problems, low emotional stability, and greater risk for depression or anxiety”** (Allen et al., 2019; Aziz Rahman et al.).

If you believe your child is in need of mental health support, RCPS can help! Please contact Dr. Carol Johnson at 540-227-0259 or [cjohnson@rappahannockschools.us](mailto:cjohnson@rappahannockschools.us) for additional information. Online safety tips for parents/youth are on the next page.

Sincerely,

Carol Johnson

Carol Johnson, Ed.D.

Assistant Superintendent, RCPS

**Online Safety Advice**

**(From Internet Matters.org-https://www.internetmatters.org/advice/11-13/**

**Have free and frank discussions**

Encourage your child to talk to you about how they use the internet and show you what they do. Discuss with them the kinds of things they might come across. A good time to talk is when they get a new device or mention a new website.

**Manage their devices**

Encourage them to use their tech devices in a communal area such as the living room or kitchen and set up a user account for your child. If you think they aren’t old enough to have a mobile phone or tablet, stay firm and explain the reasons why.

**Put yourself in control**

Activate [parental controls](https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/) on your home broadband, all devices including mobile phones and games consoles. Safe search settings can also be activated on [Google](https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/entertainment-search-engines/google-safesearch/) (and other search engines), [YouTube](https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/entertainment-search-engines/youtube-restricted-mode/) and on entertainment sites like [iTunes](https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/entertainment-search-engines/itunes-parental-controls/) and [iPlayer](https://www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/entertainment-search-engines/bbc-iplayer/" \t "_blank).

**Stay safe on the move**

Be aware that if your child is accessing the internet using public WiFi they may not have safety features active. Some providers are part of family friendly WiFi schemes with filters to block inappropriate content. Look out for friendly WiFi symbols like [Mumsnet Family Friendly WiFi](https://www.mumsnet.com/family-friendly" \t "_blank) and [RDI Friendly WiFi](http://www.friendlywifi.co.uk/) symbols when you’re out and about.

**Have an agreement**

Agree and set boundaries with them or have a [family agreement](https://www.internetmatters.org/connecting-safely-online/things-to-do-together-to-help-young-people-connect-with-others-safely/family-agreement-activities-to-do-together/) for their internet use, including when and where they can use portable devices and for how long, before they get used to doing their own thing.

**Start discussions about social networking early**

Talk to children about the benefits and risks of [social networking](https://www.internetmatters.org/advice/social-networking/) before they join any sites. Let them know that anything they upload, email or message could stay around forever online.

**Keep private information private**

If your child does have a social networking profile, teach them to block or ignore people and how to set strict privacy settings. Request that you or someone you both trust becomes their ‘friend’ or ‘follower’ to check that conversations and posts are appropriate.

**Check age ratings**

The age ratings that come with games, apps, films and social networks are a good guide to whether they’re suitable for your child. For example, the age limit is 13 for several social networking sites including Facebook and Instagram.