

The Oasis Centre - Cornwall

Registered Charity Number 1139355, founded to serve the communities in the parishes of St Columb Major, St Mawgan-in-Pydar, St Eval and St Ervan



Looking Out for Social Media

Number 28 in a series of notes on important issues.

If, overnight, the Internet and the access it provides to oceans of information and the social media that we rely on so much were to be abolished, the world as we know it would come to an end! Daily, tens of millions use the Internet and many millions use Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Reddit – the top five social media sites (out of more than a dozen) in September 2017,

In that month, police received a call from someone who has been blackmailed online, via Facebook. He accepted ‘friend requests’ from people he did not know. One of them accessed his Facebook photo album and doctored various photos by adding his face to naked pictures of someone else. The criminal threatened to post them online, so that all his contacts on Facebook would see them, and demanded £2,000 to prevent this. He sent money in the hope that this would stop it. The criminal then contacted his friends on Facebook, suggesting that they ask him to pay more money to prevent the release of the pictures. He has now contacted everyone on his Facebook account, explained the situation and asked everyone to delete the contact. He sent the money via Western Union, to the Ivory Coast.

Any ‘friend request’ on social media can open the door to criminal activity like this if the sender is unknown. A 15 year old girl, who has over 500 ‘friends’ on Facebook, was asked whether she knew these 500 people. She responded ‘no’. She always accepted friends requests, to increase her total and thus compete with her classmates. When her mother went through her ‘friend’s’ list, many of them turned out to be middle aged men. She had no idea who they were, she always just clicked ‘OK’. She felt she was in no danger even though she had been given advice at school about the dangers of online predators. She felt those dangers had been exaggerated and she knew how to look after herself.

When checked more carefully, she had three Facebook accounts. One, in her full name, that she was happy for her mother to see and to follow as a ‘friend’. One was in her school nickname (used by her and her classmates to communicate without their parents knowing) and the third was in a name she has decided to call herself. That account gave a false date of birth, making her 18, and said she was working in a local business. Her mother knew nothing about these two accounts.

Criminals know that young people, eager to test their boundaries and perhaps chafing at the constraints of school and home, are inexperienced and can be over confident. This is a vulnerability that criminals are eager to exploit.

Jeremy Simmonds, Chair, The Oasis Centre - Cornwall