School Safety and Crisis

Social Media and School Crises: Brief Facts and Tips

- ***Social media defined.*** The U.S. Department of Education (2012) defines social media as "Forms of communication either Internet or text-based that support social interactions of individuals" (p. 5).

- ***Nearly all youth and a majority of adults use social media.*** In 2012, 90% of 13- to 17-year-olds reported using some form of social media. About 70% of adults use social media regularly, and about half use two or more social media platforms. It is expected this usage will increase.

- ***Social media increases communication speed.*** Historically, it was sometimes possible for educators, parents, and other caregivers to assess a crisis threat or situation patiently over time. However, the speed of information exchanged via social media, both accurate and inaccurate, requires quick thinking and quick responding.

- ***There are potential risks associated with social media use.*** Social media can contribute to psychological trauma and other challenges. Potential risks include the following.
    - Cyberbullying or other online conflicts (e.g., a student or staff member may experience widespread and direct public ridicule; schools with social media accounts may experience negative postings about the school).
    - Quick and widespread communication of crisis-related rumors or other false information (e.g., inaccurate information about what happened or who was involved in a crisis situation).
    - Quick and widespread communication of embarrassing or inappropriate information (e.g., personal photos or shameful information posted).
    - Potential for triggering crises, increasing perceptions of threat and fear, or creating crisis contagion (e.g., 1–5% of suicides are believed to be due to a contagion effect where learning about crisis details leads to another crisis).
    - Affects privacy (e.g., individuals may not be aware of the risks associated with sharing too much).
    - Potential for overuse or as a consistent substitute for face-to-face socializing (e.g., may lead to social media depression).
    - Time consuming for educators, parents, and other caregivers to learn and monitor.

- ***Social media has potential benefits.*** The potential risks of social media are often publicized, disturbing, and at the forefront of community attention. While such challenges are concerning, it needs to be acknowledged that social media is a reality that is here to stay. Educators are encouraged to understand how social media can help prevent and respond to crisis risks. For example, social media can be used to address the following.

- CRISIS PREVENTION
  - Helping to create an extended sense of community or culture (e.g., posting of positive messages or achievements, opportunity for diverse audiences to connect).
  - Encouraging positive behavior, responsibility, and healthy relationships in schools, homes, and in the community.
  - Conducting online surveillance (e.g., monitoring crisis warning signs or threats; for example, Facebook has partnered with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to create a suicide reporting mechanism).
- CRISIS INTERVENTION
  - Quickly communicating accurate information following a crisis.
  - Rapidly dispelling rumors or other false information.
  - Quickly disseminating crisis prevention resources (e.g., numerous handouts published by NASP; see resources at end of this document).
  - Evaluating or triaging individuals who may be affected by a crisis situation (e.g., monitoring student use of social media for trauma warning signs).
  - Quickly disseminating information about how others can access mental health resources following a crisis.
  - Quickly coordinating crisis response efforts (e.g., caregiver access to a school's posting of a reunification plan).
- POSTVENTION
  - Disseminating accurate crisis situation updates in real time from any location to a wide audience.
  - Disseminate information about public services or planned memorials.

- **Consider using smartphone applications in crisis situations to gain additional information on how to respond to the event.** Many crisis apps already exist (e.g., FEMA – http://www.fema.gov/app; Psychological First Aid Mobile (NCTSN) – http://www.nctsn.org/content/pfa-mobile; Psychological First Aid Tutorial (UMN) – http://sph.umn.edu/ce/perl/mobile/pfatutorial/; NIMS ICS GUIDE: NIMS App – https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/nims-ics-guide/id406880725?mt=8).

- **Understand the barriers to social media use.** Not everyone has access to or regularly uses social media. Given individual variation in age, language, culture, and other demographic variables, information must be delivered via other low-tech formats, too.

- **Create and/or understand social media policies.** Schools and community organizations are encouraged to create and communicate social media policies. Parents, caregivers, and others in the community can familiarize themselves with such policies.

- **Prioritize ongoing social media training, both formal and informal.** Research related to how social media and crises interact is limited. Social media platforms and applications also evolve quickly. Stay informed about current social media being used by youth and adults in your community. Youth in the community can take on the role of cultural brokers by informing educators, parents, and other adults about what and how social media are being used.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES:

Chicago Public Schools Social Media Toolkit: http://cps.edu/Pages/SocialMediaToolkit.aspx

Common Sense Media. (2012). *Social media, social life: How teens view their digital lives.* Retrieved from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/social-media-social-life-how-teens-view-their-digital-lives

Pew Research Center. (2015). *Social networking factsheet.* Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe & Healthy Students. (2012). *Social media in school emergency management: Using new media technology to improve emergency management communications.* Retrieved from http://rems.ed.gov/docs/Training_SocialMediaInEM.pdf

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Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2016). *Social Media and School Crises: Brief Facts and Tips* [handout]. Bethesda, MD: Author.