**FACT SHEET 3**

**Social Networking**

This fact sheet explains the power and the pitfalls of social networking.

The past decade has been witness to the arrival and widespread popularity of a new tool for communication: social networking sites. Boyd and Ellison, (2008) define social networking sites as web based services that allow individuals to construct a public (or semi-public) profile and display a list of other users with whom they share a social connection.

In addition, these sites have created innovative communication channels, such as posting comments on individual’s “walls” and “tagging” pictures, offering new ways for individuals to communicate with their online networks.

**No guarantee of honesty**

The information contained in these sites is entirely personal. It has to be said, however, that the accuracy of that information has always got to be in doubt as there is no guarantee of honesty and in a recent declaration by Facebook, 82 million profiles exist today that are false. There are a whole variety of reasons for this – many people just don’t like exposing all of their own information, others create false personae for spamming purposes and then there are the most worrying and that is those who wish to perpetuate criminal activity in one form or another.

**Know your friends**

The terminology is sometimes confusing. Social networking talks of “friends” but they are really just people who have been allowed access to your profile, rather than a person close to you. Some of the questions that we have to consider from the creation and growth of social networking present challenges for social workers.

The social worker Code of Ethics demands confidentiality and respect for service users. However, the law and guidance such as Working Together instructs us to investigate situations where abuse is suspected or where children or vulnerable adults are at risk.

**Personal profiles**

Another thing to consider are social workers’ own profiles and not just what they include but who may indeed have access to them and how that impacts on a professional workers ability to carry out their role.

Some things to remember when setting up a personal social networking profile include thinking about the people who would potentially have access to the profile and information that is placed there. Profiles can be accessed by people who you network with, co-workers and service users. If, for example your profile and activity do not match the image that you maintain at work then there is potential for you to become vulnerable and there will always be people who wish to exploit vulnerability when they find it.

Whether we are seen as role models or just important adults in people’s lives – any fracturing of this can weaken professional responsibility.

**A quick checklist**

Please remember the following:

* If your profile is not set to private then all of your information is completely viewable to anybody who searches for it
* If your profile is set to private then your name and basic information such as town of residence and profile image are still searchable for and contact can still be attempted via private messages
* If your profile is set to private your postings may still be viewable on contacts’ profiles which may not be set to private

There is a current debate, and national policy is being prepared by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) around the issue of “acceptable or unacceptable” surveillance of social networking sites. Essentially this is a debate about where ethical behaviour stops and the protection of vulnerable people takes over.

Many employers are now actively creating a policy with regards to who amongst their workforce should have permission to scrutinise service users’ sites if it is felt that children or vulnerable adults are at risk and information is needed to help the assessment process. Some employers designate a few people only within a department to set up profiles for this purpose from a work-based account.

**Lessons to learn**

An interesting point was the behaviour of Peter Connelly’s mother, Tracey, who according to a Guardian newspaper report, regularly shared on social networking sites that, instead of regularly nurturing Peter, she spent her days “drinking vodka, watching pornographic films and having sex” with her new boyfriend, Steven Barker. She also said that she was “madly in love with the most amazing guy” and that her “fella is nuts”. Given that many professionals were unaware of his presence in the house, or the nature of their lifestyle, accessing their posts on social media sites might just have tipped the balance and provided clearer information.

**Is the only way Ethics?**

There is great debate to be had and a distinct lack of clarity nationally. Social networking is here to stay, the formats may change and technology may improve but this will only bring with it further challenges and ethical and moral issues to be sorted out by professionals, such as social workers. We must become better informed and more able to understand and use technological methods of communication. Whether preventing people tracing children and vulnerable people who should not be found by certain others or interrupting cyber-bullying or accessing that vital piece of information to determine levels of risk in a family, the use of social networking surveillance has to be conducted with a level of ethnical professionalism as well as being mindful of Human Rights legislation and the law.

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