

Tackling Online Abuse: Written evidence submitted by KIND ONLINE on 11/08/2020 (TOA0010)

WHAT

An argument for a programme of lessons in kindness in all online activity to be introduced into all schools, from primary upwards, as part of the IT curriculum formulated in the Government's new internet/online strategy outlined in the White Paper *Online Harms*, which is set to be brought to MPs in the next Parliament session, and as a submission for the Petitions Committee's current inquiry into tackling online abuse.

WHY

- * The traditionally-divisive subjects of religion and race are no longer the major causes of social antagonism, a third player has entered the arena - social media.
- * Although social media was intended to bring people together, a consequence of bringing them together has been to bring them together to fight and antagonise.
- * We all know this, we see it everywhere - online bullying which causes depression, mental ill health and, at worst, suicides; sexting which is so damaging to self-esteem at best and much worse at worst; vicious public criticism which has damaged even the likes of JK Rowling; vile threats which have caused genuine fear among the staff of MPs and have even caused some Members to close their surgeries because of real concerns for their safety.
- * Social media has enabled a tide of unkindness; nastiness has become the norm and due to the competitive engagement which social media encourages, the ante is continually upped, the posts get nastier, threats of violence and anti-social behaviour escalate as we become continually inured to what once would have shocked us.
- * Clearly this stands to only have a hugely detrimental effect on society, making it more aggressive, more angry. And whilst much of this traffic of hate could, perhaps, be defended by its activists as "only words", if we permit the growth of a verbally angrier society then eventually, as we increasingly are seeing, some of that anger will explode on the streets into real violence.
- * Much of this anti-social media is happening because, simply, we have not been taught differently; we have not been educated how not to be unkind online, the consequences of online unkindness have not been spelled out and demonstrated - at least until after the event, when the consequences are alarmingly reported in the news.
- * The operative word in social media is media. There has always been media, but before the internet the media was in the hands of professionals, journalists who, whilst they may have had bias and personal prejudices, were regulated by their training and professionalism not to report them in the hateful terms permitted by a new [social] media for which there is currently no regulation, training nor education.
- * As with anything that is potentially damaging, we need to be trained how to use social media socially. It's like driving - imagine how chaotic and dangerous our roads would be if there was no Highway Code and we had not been taught how to drive. The current verbal anarchy of social media is the equivalent of allowing anybody to get into a car and start driving, whether they know how to or not.

* Just as road safety requires a Highway Code, so too mental, physical and societal safety now requires a Superhighway Code, one predicated on consideration for others. But that will be difficult to enforce without the social media companies, Facebook, Twitter etc, taking the action that they have historically been reluctant to do.

* But in the current absence of an official Superhighway Code, we can at least educate; give our children - and it is the coming generation which is important here - lessons in how to behave on social media, just as we teach them how to drive.

* Education is the key here. The KIND ONLINE initiative proposes social media training, a new culture of kindness, tolerance and understanding, to be taught as a subject in all schools as part of the national curriculum. IT per se is taught in all schools now, children are taught how to use computers but not necessarily how to use them or their smart phones responsibly.

* KIND ONLINE proposes lessons in online kindness starting in primary schools as a compulsory part of the curriculum which is then continually taught through to sixth form. At primary level it can be simple and basic, for instance elementary lessons such as instruction of why computers/smart phones should not dominate one's life [as they currently do] and classes in how it feels to be the recipient of publicly-posted unkindness. At higher levels, the social media education could take in broader concepts such as the study of ethics and moral philosophy, the dangers and methodology of online radicalisation, analysis of political manipulation online, consideration and discussion of such contrariness as why the woke generation does not appear to be very not woke when it posts.

* The exact details of the 'how' in this could be for educationalists and social psychologists to decide, and KIND ONLINE is affiliated to education experts who can advise on this, but none of us needs to be an expert to see and know that a new online education is urgently required because the consequences of its absence are damaging us all, individually and collectively.

EXAMPLES OF HOW

At primary school level, KIND ONLINE lessons should be tailored to the young age of students and therefore kept simple. For instance:

- The “Mum Rule” – if you would not say it to your Mum, don’t post it.
- The “how would you feel?” rule - post unto others as you would like to be posted to yourself.
- Responsible posting – don’t spread gossip or rumours.
- Respect others’ opinions – they are only opinions, they are not a threat, accept that we must agree to differ.
- Don’t swear.
- Don’t be insulting.
- Don’t post to anyone that which you would not say to their face.
- Don’t post anonymously.
- “Like” good deeds and applaud/congratulate them.
- Do not Share personal pictures that are not yours.
- Thank people for kindnesses.
- Do not body shame or mock the physical appearance of others.
- Do not be racist, sexist or ageist.
- Be honest in what you post but not to the extend of risking upsetting others.

- Do not be judgemental. Do not scold, nag or 'correct' the posts of others.
- Set a good example.
- Share uplifting, helpful posts.
- Be positive not negative in all that you post.
- Compliment others where possible. Do not be false in your praise.
- Adapt the code of Desiderata as a guide for online behaviour.

AN URGENCY

There is an urgent need for users of social media to be educated to kinder, more considerate ways because of the probability of the risk of a second wave of the Covid crisis driving even more antagonistic behaviour online.

The original Online Harms White Paper was published in April 2019, the Online Harms Response [to public consultation] White Paper was published in February 2020 – therefore in both cases **pre-Covid**, the findings of the White Papers have not taken into account the effects on online abuse of the Covid Factor.

Existing factors caused by the first wave of Covid are set to combine with new circumstances which, if combined, will cause social media to become an even more amplified expression of discontent, division and unrest.

Explanation: In the first wave there was an element of “this is different but we’re getting paid, there’s a warm Spring to enjoy and a long Summer” etc. But a second wave will not have good weather as a backdrop to it and this is key.

A second wave, if it comes, will come with an antagonising change in the weather; it will come with drizzle, fog, rain and bitter cold as autumn/winter weather takes effect and, as is the nature of such weather, makes life more depressing.

Couple the poor weather to factors which will exist as a consequence of the first wave – growing unemployment, collapse of businesses and a significantly-reduced economy, no income, struggling to pay the rent, mortgage arrears, fears of losing one’s home, struggling to pay bills and to feed families, civic unrest as crime soars as a result of money running out etc – add that all up and we face far more aggression and conflict online than we now see as a result of the first Covid wave.

Couple that with other possible consequences of a second wave – no Halloween, no Bonfire Night, pubs and restaurants possibly closed again, no Christmas for families apart, no carols around the tree, no seeing grandchildren opening presents, social distancing causing mentally-debilitating loneliness from the necessity of isolation etc – and the gloom and despair which feeds social media unkindness and antagonism will spiral even more.

As life is made more difficult by the necessary steps of coping with a second wave, that in turn will fuel its expression through rants and rages on social media and as the poor weather combines with that and the factors caused by the first wave [unemployment etc, per above] that will cause social media to become even more aggressive and divisive.

So there is an urgency to the need for a KIND ONLINE initiative, an urgency to educate at least primary schoolchildren with an online kindness programme. This does not require months or years of research to formulate a programme, the lessons are simple and basic [see examples above] and, as such, could start to be taught quickly.

WHO

KIND ONLINE is an initiative created for the London-based tuff.earth charity and its current #KIND20 campaign, a social media campaign aimed at encouraging acts of kindness as a panacea to the gloom and despair caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The #KIND20 campaign has garnered around 220,000 followers on Facebook.

In July 2020 #KIND20 press officer Geoff Baker wrote individually to all 650 MPs inviting them to support the idea of KIND ONLINE.

He wrote: “I suspect that as an MP you have experienced your unfair share of the online abuse, bullying, hate and ridicule which is so distressingly and damagingly virulent everywhere these days – KIND ONLINE has been established to try mitigate this curse of our times.

“As part of its wider mission to encourage more acts of kindness in the community, tuff.earth is now calling for Parliament, when it resumes, to back a drive for us all to be more compassionate, tolerant and less nasty in what and how we post online.

“In particular, we will be lobbying the Department for Education to investigate introducing lessons in being kind online as part of schools’ IT curriculum, from primary level through to sixth form. We believe that teaching our children well will be to the ultimate benefit of all society.”

Baker has since received cross-Party expressions of support for the KIND ONLINE initiative, from the following MPs: Virginia Crosbie, Andrea Jenkyns, John McDonnell, Seema Malhotra, Andrew Selous, Sir Ed Davey, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Chi Onwurah, Sara Britcliffe, Lisa Cameron, Debbie Abrahams and Bob Blackman.

The tuff.earth charity – www.tuff.earth – was previously known as The Unity Of Faiths Foundation. Under this umbrella it originated an anti-gangs and anti-radicalisation programme in London which unified youth of conflicting cultures and faiths by bringing them together to play in soccer teams. This successful programme won the public support of President Obama, the EU Commission, London Mayor Sadiq Khan and The Pope.

It is Baker’s belief that if supported by Parliament, a KIND ONLINE initiative could be rapidly introduced to primary schools at least and that it would have the widespread support of a wide range of public figures, from Bobby Norris to J.K. Rowling, and support too from the mainstream media and many parents and grandparents who are deeply concerned that social media abuse needs to be tackled now, before post-Covid factors make it much worse.