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**Bobbie Brown, Safeguarding Lead**

**Social media and group violence: a parent's guide**



There have been reports recently of a violent craze sweeping across Liverpool, where pupils film each other fighting and send the videos to Instagram accounts devoted to showing images and videos of the fights.[1] It's even been referred to as 'Fight Club for children'.

The craze is reminiscent of the 'happy slapping' trend in the early 2000s, when teenagers filmed others punching and slapping victims and then shared them on their mobile phones.

Last year, an incident in Walthamstow, North East London, similarly caught the headlines.

It involved a large group of teenagers who became involved in a mass brawl after two girls from 'rival' local colleges began fighting each other over a boy.[2]

So how did a teenage love triangle develop into an incident big enough to merit an entire street being shut down, and local travel being disrupted?

Afterwards, it was suggested that incidents such as these are often planned and promoted via social media.

Colin James, founder of charity Gangs Unite, acknowledged that technology may play a part:

'Social media is changing things. It used to be word of mouth but now when people talk about it on social media it attracts so many others.'[3]

Before social media, rumours of fights may have spread across a school year group, or maybe even a whole school, but young people's permanent social connectedness means more people can become involved more quickly. And it can help people plan and organise these sort of 'events' or activities.

### **Mob mentality**

Social media is not only a way of spreading news of fights. The relative anonymity and public nature of sites such as Twitter and Instagram allow the videos to be spread by people with no emotional connection to the people featured in them. This can result in an online 'mob mentality' similar to what happens when bands of strangers gang up to shame people on social media sites.

A combination of this lack of face-to-face interaction and the relative anonymity that social media offers, together with young people's desire to belong to groups or gangs, may well help promote the sharing of these often upsetting images and videos showing violence between peers.

It's worth remembering, though, that this same online 'mob mentality' can also be a force for good. Social media users are just as likely to come together to back up and support someone who is seen to be being picked on online, or support something they feel strongly about. Indeed, in a [report](#)(link is external) in 2012 into the online content of the New York Times, it was found that positive messages get shared more on social media than negative ones.

### **Publicly recorded**

It's not just that social media allows for more people to find out about these kinds of fights, it's also the fact that the fight itself will often be broadcast across social media once it's happened. #Walthamstowriots trended nationally on Twitter, with people posting films, pictures and mocking remarks, despite the fact police pointed out that it wasn't actually a riot. It also triggered a copycat fight a few days later.

Sadly, video footage like this is gold dust to certain YouTube users, with groups devoted to 'girl fights' on the site.

### **What can parents do?**

*Remind the children and young people in your care that...*

- Smartphones are everywhere. It is really easy for someone to take a photo or video of a young person involved in something spontaneous like a fight and share it with others online. This can have a permanent effect on their online and offline reputation. How would the video or image be viewed by a future employer or university recruiter?
- Drama between friends can seem so important at the time, but in a few weeks, they'll look back and won't remember why they were so concerned about it.
- If they hear plans of a fight, or something similar, spreading across their social media feeds, they should let an adult know about it. They won't get into any trouble.
- It can be really easy to get irate and self-righteous on social media and become caught up in an unhealthy group mentality. It could be because of someone's comment that they found offensive, or to fight for a collective cause. But things aren't always as they seem – often comments only seem offensive after being taken out of context, for example.
- When you're part of a group, it's easy to join sides and become aggressive. Advise your child that things can quickly escalate and move into the territory of group attacking or bullying.
- Young people should be encouraged to think before they post on social media, and be reminded that silly comments they'll probably regret in the future can have a permanent effect on their online reputation.

### **What If your child has been involved?**

- **If you find out your child has been involved in a fight**, the first thing you'll worry about is whether they're physically OK. After you've established that, you'll need to have a serious conversation with them about why they got into a fight. Try not to seem too accusatory, or upset, as this may prevent them from opening up to you. As always, making sure all lines of communication are kept open is a priority with this kind of issue.
- **If there is footage of your child in a fight** – whether they're the perpetrator, or the one being targeted – it isn't something you want online for other people to see. Find out who posted the content, and ask them to take it down. If the incident is linked to school, they can help you do this. If the person who posted the content is unknown, contact the social media platform to ask them to take it down. Find out how [here](#) (link is external).
- It may be that you can't control the spread of the footage. If that is the case, support your child. As with all bad experiences, there are lessons to be learnt. Make a plan together of how they will avoid situations like this in the future. Good plans usually focus on getting rid of negative influences and avoiding high risk situations. Discuss with them how they can spend more time on positive friendships and activities.
- If your child sees this sort of content on social media and tells you about it, remind them that this sort of violence is never acceptable, even if it is a joke or prank and the chances are that somebody has got hurt. Encourage them to always report the content to their school, as well as the social media network they're using. Instagram in particular has a very strong stance against bullying.
- Both resorting to physical aggression as a way of dealing with a problem, or fighting just for the 'fun' of it, may point to a deeper emotional issue. You may want to ask them if there's anything else in their lives that's worrying them. Remind them that it's very important they find other ways of dealing with problems, such as communication, negotiation and compromise, as carrying this violent behaviour into adulthood could get them into serious trouble in the future.

**You may feel your child needs professional help with anger or other problems.** Young Minds has some good advice(link is external) on anger, aggression and violence in young people and what parents can do to help their children.

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[1] <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/instagram-school-fights-craze-liverpool-10679896>(link is external)

[2] <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/walthamstow-central-station-riot-was-sparked-by-two-girls-fighting-over-a-boy-a3084376.html>(link is external)

[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11916944/Walthamstow-Central-girl-fight-Female-street-violence-on-the-rise.html>(link is external)

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