



JANUARY 2024

New Year, new you?

The power and limits of resolutions

As we start the Lent Term, it's important that we take time to reflect on the achievements of the previous term, be happy with what we have done well, and celebrate even the smallest of successes. It's equally important to look forward and think about what we want to achieve in the coming term - in which areas do we want to develop and in which areas do we want to make more progress? At this time of year it's common for people to make New Year's resolutions, but can they really be of any use?

Resolutions can be beneficial in a number of ways that help support our academic and personal lives. By setting specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timed (SMART) goals, we can give ourselves clear direction and purpose. Form teachers can help with target setting, and pupils can record and review them in planners. By reviewing targets, pupils can see the progress they are making which will help identify the need for any extra support. Targets don't have to be purely academic; perhaps pupils might like to try a different sport or club, read a different genre of books or start a society with some like-minded friends. Resolutions help to prioritise goals and focus efforts on what truly matters to the individual. By setting specific resolutions, a pupil is more likely to concentrate on those aspects of their life that they want to improve.

Resolutions often involve self improvement. Setting goals to achieve new skills, adopting healthier habits, or resolving to face particular challenges in a different way means real personal growth and contributions to wellbeing can be experienced. A pupil might like to concentrate on strength work in sports or beat a DAS master at chess club by learning new moves. They might think about learning yoga or meditation to help with having a positive mental attitude, or they might try a more relaxed bedtime routine. We know that young people need lots of sleep, so maybe a resolution could be to be screen-free an hour before bed and keep the phone in



a different room overnight. Young people might ask themselves, "Do I need to think about how I interact with my peers?" or "Might this year be the year of no drama? Less gossiping?" or "Might this be the year I recognise my own skills and talents and celebrate my uniqueness?"



A pupil might decide to go to maths clinic from January, or maybe this is the year they learn to row. Many resolutions involve the establishment of positive habits. By consistently working towards self determined resolutions, pupils can develop routines that contribute to long-term positive changes.

Pursuing and sticking to resolutions often requires discipline and commitment. This can help build resilience and the ability to stay focused on long-term goals. One challenging resolution young people might consider is to really cut back on the amount of time spent on social media. Fear of missing out is always there but perhaps it would be useful to think about how using social media makes them feel - is it a motivating factor in their life? - and be resolved to only do that which has a positive impact on the mind.

Of course, it is important to approach New Year's resolutions realistically and with a plan. Setting too many or unrealistic goals can lead to frustration and disappointment. However, when approached thoughtfully, resolutions can be a powerful tool for personal development and positive change. It's also important to remember that anyone can "start afresh" at any time of the year!

Top tips for dealing with exam stress

The start of the Lent Term means exams for the senior years. Years 11-13 will have a full schedule of trial and midyear exams that will see the Newsom Hall turned back into an exam centre rather than the Year 12 common room (while we wait for the refurbished and extended Queen's Building to open!). Hopefully, students have used the Christmas holidays purposefully and are raring to go.

- **Eat, sleep, succeed:** During the Lent exam period, students must make sure they are properly rested, not revising into the small hours of the morning, and eating properly. A day of exams is much harder to do successfully if starting on an empty stomach, so students are encouraged to have breakfast at home or they can buy it in the dining hall at school from 8:00am.

- **Block out time:** Effective time management is really important, and many students do benefit from creating a realistic study schedule. Try to avoid cramming at the last minute; spread study sessions over more manageable chunks of time, and avoid distractions. Remember, relaxation is important too, so seeing friends and family, enjoying hobbies, and ensuring a good balance of all aspects of life and study are key to exam success.

- **Don't delay:** Using study leave as an extension to the frivolities of the Christmas holiday is not a good idea. Students must make sure they know what exam is on and when and be sure to give plenty of time to arrive punctually. Exams are stressful; that is an undeniable fact, but if revision has been efficient and students know their stuff, stress is reduced.

- **Ask for help:** identifying aspects of the course that are the most challenging, then seeking help with specific areas of confusion is really helpful. Teachers will all be around for last minute queries or quick revision sessions - students should just email them and ask! Pastoral staff are always available to help allay any last minute panics, and The Snug can be accessed for quiet downtime if needed before or after the exam. There is also the option of staying in school to revise during study leave.

- **Cancel comparisons:** We want our students to focus on their own pace and strengths and avoid comparing themselves to others. Progress is a marathon rather than a sprint, and trial and mid-term exams are a useful part of this process. Seeing them like this can take away some of the inevitable dread...

As we get nearer to the "real" exams, support increases with revision technique seminars and "dealing with exam stress" forums. These will be advertised in due course.

Remember, experiencing exam stress is normal, but if our students start to feel overwhelmed or simply want some more ideas on navigating their way through exams, there is lots of support at Dame Allan's. Students can approach subject teachers, attend surgeries and revision sessions, and chat with their Heads of Year about the best next steps to take. We are here to help; we have loads of experience with this, and we really do understand.

The Lent exams need to be used as a way of benchmarking progress and reviewing revision techniques ahead of the actual GCSEs and A Levels. Good luck!

Promoting Digital Safety

One 'winter wellbeing' resolution may be to try a 'digital detox', banishing the box sets and packing the consoles away, but if this sounds easier said than done, perhaps we need a rethink on our attitude towards screen time and the online activity of children.

Social media usage

Love it or hate it, we are all aware of the impact that social media plays on our own lives and the lives of our children, but can there ever be a 'healthy' amount of screen time? A thought provoking piece of research by Bristol University suggests that rather than focusing on the amount of screen time a young person has, it is better to focus on how a child is using social media. In a podcast by the Association for Children and Adolescent Mental Health, researcher Lizzie Winstone explains that teenage users can generally be classed into three categories: high, moderate and minimal users based on the amount of content viewed and commented upon. Winstone also adds a fourth category, those who have high 'passive' usage but who also 'broadcast', in other words, sharing photos and videos, commenting on posts, sharing links and having an active public online presence. Whilst the risks of passive 'scrolling' include fear of missing out, negative social comparison, envy and guilt, Winstone warns that adolescents who fall into the 'broadcaster' category also carry higher additional social and emotional risks of negative feedback and peer ostracisation than other users. Interestingly, Winstone also points out that, after adjusting for screen time and baseline mental health, moderate users had the lowest risk of self harm and poor wellbeing with outcomes either better, or not significantly worse, compared to minimal users.

Fake news

It seems that it is not just how much screen time a child has, it's what they do with it that counts. Dame Allan's

staff received a training session by Jeremy Haywood, lecturer at the UCL Institute of Education, which focused on conspiracy theories and the impact that such extreme viewpoints can have in the classroom. Haywood explained that interest in conspiracy theories in adolescents often starts at around the age of 14 and peaks at 18. Young people who become interested in conspiracy theories often use it as part of an alternative identity and can become entrenched in their viewpoints.

A good antidote to this set way of thinking is to encourage children to apply a 'healthy amount' of skepticism to what they see and read. Disinformation is popular: MIT researchers found that false news stories are 70 per cent more likely to be retweeted than true ones whilst UNESCO found that in 2020 30-40% of all social media posts came from unreliable sources, were misleading, or included manipulated content. If your child is becoming increasingly politically and socially aware, help them to adopt a critical approach by asking questions and taking an interest in their views. You can also help to point them in the direction of balanced and credible sources. As a school we subscribe to both JSTOR and Britannica Schools which are a useful port of call for reliable academic information.

There are many steps you can take to help keep your child safe online. All school equipment is monitored using an app called Securly which identifies and blocks access to harmful content. We also provide access to a parental app that allows you to view the activity of your child's Chromebook and adjust



the filters when the Chromebook is not on the school Wifi. This enables you to view website activity, block websites, create schedules and "pause" internet activity. Please see this [link](#) for more information. The NSPCC also have a range of useful information for parents on their website, whilst our Year 9 parents will receive an informative talk from the charity at 'Life in the Middle School'

Open and honest discussion

Unfortunately, no filtering or monitoring system is failsafe so a calm, open and honest discussion with your child can often be the best way to find out what they are looking at and inviting them to talk about anything that is on their mind.

The more we learn about screen time, the more it seems that 'not all screen time is created equal'. Try to make time to ask open-ended questions about your child's online activity: what is your child using screen time for and how does it really make them feel? Could they make some changes if their social media usage is problematic? By being curious you can help them evaluate which apps and interactions are helping, and which are harming them.

A moment for mentoring

We spoke with our Sixth Form Mentoring Officers, Liv and Teddy, about the importance of their role and how to access mentoring support.

Liv and Teddy, both Year 13, are keen to emphasise that no two mentoring sessions are alike. They - and their supporting team of Sixth Formers - mentor pupils from across the Senior School. Liv supports mentoring throughout the Girls' School, whilst Teddy looks after the Boys' School. Liv explained: "Generally, I find that younger pupils, like Year 7s, are looking for pastoral support, while older pupils who are getting close to GCSEs are more focused on academic support." Teddy added: "I have four mentees at the moment, all academic. I'm passionate about languages, and I help three pupils with Latin and one with French. "However, we can help with anything, from settling in nerves, to tailored revision support."

Pupils can reach out for support via their Form Tutor, Head of Year or the Pastoral team, or by emailing Liv and Teddy directly. Each mentee will benefit from 6 weeks of support from a Sixth Form volunteer, helping them to work through whatever difficulties they may be having. "All of the Sixth Form mentors are really nice people!" said Teddy, "Mentors are there to help and listen, not to judge. We have lots of people who want to support you."

Mentoring sessions are generally held in form time or at lunch. When asked about the advice they would give to any younger pupils who might be feeling lonely, Liv said: "I always tell pupils to join some of our co-curricular clubs and try to form a friendship group. Sometimes, just having a chat with a mentor can help - it can help you work on your social and listening skills, and improve confidence. "Some people find it easier speaking to a Sixth Former rather than a teacher, we have been in their shoes and



can offer peer support. It doesn't feel as formal." Teddy added that he'd like to see more boys reaching out for support: "The mentoring service does have significantly lower numbers of boys asking for support, so I'd just like them to know that we are here, and not to be worried about getting in touch." Both students are enthusiastic about the impact that being a mentor has had on them. Teddy explains: "It's given me a different perspective, and I've definitely improved my own empathy and social skills by being a mentor." Liv agrees: "It is so heartwarming to see your mentees thrive, especially if they may have started off shy and then you see them in the corridors with all of their friends. I also mentor in history, which I find really rewarding."

After Dame Allan's, Liv hopes to study medicine, whilst Teddy is pursuing studies in modern foreign languages.



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