STAYING SAFE ONLINE: WHY EDUCATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

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As in-person activities were curtailed at the start of the pandemic and children's physical worlds suddenly got smaller, their online worlds expanded just as quickly. Even back in April 2020, **UNICEF** forewarned that children were "at increased risk of harm" during the pandemic, due to the huge rise in their screen time as their lives shifted online to learn, as well as maintain social links to family and friends.

We all know that technology moves fast. New apps, trends and online crazes surface regularly, and it's easy to get swept up in the latest, greatest thing. That has certainly been magnified during the current circumstances where other activities and social outlets have been limited. UNICEF feared that this increased use of technology could expose children to more online dangers (such as being exposed to harmful content) or prompt more risk-taking, like talking to strangers or becoming drawn into risky activity.

Protective school technology

When students are in school, they are guided and protected by technology as they learn about the online domain. In line with the **Children's Internet Protection Act**, schools will have tools in place for filtering and monitoring, and some may have keyword analysis to identify trends, enabling school counselors to keep a close eye on activity that may occur across a range of different e-safety topics, from bullying and radicalization to child sexual exploitation and more.

It is important though not to simply restrict access to everything to keep students safe or they would never learn anything. Instead, schools can use technology to provide a safe online environment in which students can test out what they have learned about interacting with others on the internet. Some school e-safety solutions will even enable parameters to be set for age-appropriate use that will allow students the freedom to learn — and, importantly, make mistakes — in safety.

However, now that students are learning from home, the situation has changed. If they are using a school-supplied device, that same filtering and support can still take place but the vast majority will now be using personal or household devices without these safeguards. Therefore, having the knowledge to make good decisions about online safety is crucial. In fact, the **Department of Justice** has published some advice for parents to help keep their children safe online, specifically during the pandemic.

What is digital citizenship?

Equipping students with the skills and knowledge to use technology responsibly — to research and find information and be able to validate its authenticity and accuracy — starts in elementary school and runs right through a student's school career and beyond. Digital citizenship is a critical part of education (especially in our current situation) because students need these skills to take ownership of their online lives and make informed choices as they interact with others.

It's a vast area to learn about and schools must address every part. Just as we learn the social protocols of interacting in person, there is a parallel set of rules for interacting online, sometimes referred to as the **nine elements of digital citizenship**. They cover: digital access, digital commerce, digital communication, digital literacy, digital etiquette, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities and digital health and wellness.

Getting the message across

Integrating teaching under these headings will ensure students have a broad understanding of what it means to participate in the online community — and there are some outstanding resources available from organizations such as **ISTE** to help teachers do this. Schools I have spoken with have also found success with peer-led programs, like **eCadets**, that empower students to be online safety experts, encouraging their friends and classmates to be responsible and keep themselves safe as they go online.

Of course, keeping up to date with the latest trends is vital, and so staff training must be kept current and the validity of resources constantly reviewed. There is no value at all in whipping out a worksheet on the dangers of MySpace!

Emphasising essential online safety messages little and often, regardless of what the class is, will help them to become embedded. This way, when students are solely responsible for their own unchecked technology use, hopefully they will remember some of what they have learned.

An additional powerful tool in the teaching of safe internet use is to involve parents and caregivers. By taking part in their children's online activities from an early age, they are perfectly placed to talk with them about what apps they are using and why — and guide them as they learn. I have talked to many schools who make significant efforts to keep parents in the loop on this subject, while educating them and pointing them toward useful resources, too. It is a strategy that really pays off, as busy parents need all the help they can get to keep up with the fast-changing landscape, and this means they are better placed to be alert to any potential dangers that their children are facing.

Don't drop the ball

Continuous learning is the only way to ensure children have the knowledge to be able to question, research and make their own judgments on what is safe or real online. Reinforcing those essential safety messages, as well as staying abreast of online trends and the effects they can have, is key to being able to get the most out of the internet while remaining safe. Teachers and parents having those conversations with children and young people, and discussing and learning together, can really help them think twice when they are confronted with questions such as, "Is it safe to send a reply to this person I don't know?" "Is this real or not?" or "This activity is making me uncomfortable — should I carry on?"

We are all learning all the time. We can't shield young people from all the risks, but what we can do is give them the tools to heighten their awareness and help them make decisions to the best of their ability.

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