

ONLINE SAFETY

Published by International Teacher Magazine | Comments by Al Kingsley

Approaches to digital safeguarding

In 2021 the online safety of students became a major concern. Al Kingsley has some starting points for a planned approach to digital safeguarding.

A problem going nowhere,

As schools are increasingly reliant on technology for learning both in and out of the classroom, tackling digital safeguarding becomes ever more complex. There are, however, several steps school leaders can take to ensure the digital welfare of students – and alongside eyes and ears, using online learning technologies to monitor, track and report how potentially at-risk students are in their online activity, at all times, is vital.

Online safety - anytime, anywhere

The fact is, most safeguarding events occur outside of classroom hours, which unfortunately leads to potential problems slipping through the net. As a consequence of the pandemic however, many students are equipped with their own school learning devices to enable blended learning to continue and individual learning to occur outside of school hours. If that's the case at your school, school leaders may consider implementing solutions to monitor students' online activity on their school devices at all times – and, critically, in any location – to ensure that keeping them safe online doesn't just stop at the end of the school day.

Identifying those most at risk

Identifying and prioritising students engaged in genuinely high-risk activity is of paramount importance in any online safety policy. Teachers, school staff and safeguarding leads will of course have an idea of which pupils may be more vulnerable – however, the fluid nature of online environments makes it hard to spot some of the risks, which is why it's vital the technology students use for learning can also protect them.

Using a solution that offers keyword monitoring is a highly effective way to identify students who are engaged in potentially risky activity. However, it's important to flag that context is crucial in

these situations: your platform needs to go beyond simply highlighting worrying words or phrases, and analyse the context in which these terms are being used (i.e., whether they are accidental, academic or indicative of risk). Some platforms can even go so far as to capture screen images or screen recordings to evidence that activity, while looking at the time of day, the device used, the history of similar searches a student has carried out, and whether the search is within a school lesson or in their own time, plays a huge factor in determining a false alarm or a genuine risk.

Safeguarding tools

Some of the more advanced safeguarding tools use this 'contextual intelligence' to analyse risks and grade them with a number that quickly indicates to staff whether urgent intervention is needed, enabling them to act with the correct professional response.

Alerts can also play a huge role in keeping students safe. If the system alerts staff when a student is engaged in risky activity, this means they can then promptly address the issue with the student and/or monitor them to ensure they are being effectively shielded from online harms. On the other hand, if the school thinks there is a more serious cause for concern, they can also then alert the child's parents to help ensure the student is protected outside of school hours.

Another challenge in keeping students safe online is that not all students' first languages will be the same – especially in an international school – and often, young people can sometimes appear to have their own language that includes an abundant use of slang terms! This is why we included a wide variety of language packs in our own learning platform to recognise keywords across all the languages used by students at any school. Schools can even share and exchange local terms with other schools and add any new ones to their database to further broaden their eSafety net, if they wish.

Monitoring trends

Spotting and monitoring trending topics across a school is another key method of ensuring potential safeguarding concerns are not left unchecked. Learning technologies that keep track of trending words and phrases used by students can



help staff detect whether there is a school-wide topic of concern that needs addressing or if it's a more localised issue. For example, in classroom cloud, a 'word cloud' that is powered by the keywords students are triggering helps safeguarding leads see, at a glance, the exact online safety topics that are currently trending across the school.

Equipped with this knowledge, schools can support their 'whole school approach', ensure staff are kept abreast of new words and are fully informed of any escalating trends so that they can intervene where necessary to ensure students are kept safe.

Teachable moments

It's not just school staff who can learn from this: the information gathered can also offer useful 'teachable' moments for the students. By using a learning platform that simultaneously educates and protects, schools can raise awareness of the concerns that students may already be discussing or searching for themselves – and empower them to keep themselves safe from harm.

Creating an environment that encourages student voice or allows for student digital leaders can also be a great starting point for engagement when it comes to online safety issues – opening up a dialogue between them and their teachers. Often, peer-led initiatives can be very successful, as students feel more comfortable talking to and confiding in people their own age.

Moving with the times

Education technology use is only going to increase in the future, especially after the pivotal role it has played over the last two years to ensure young people still had access to education and their teachers, despite the rampant global health crisis. And whilst this new and increased use of learning technologies is incredibly positive, the challenge of how to effectively safeguard young people in a digital environment is constantly shifting, meaning that shielding students from inappropriate content while allowing them the freedom to learn within safe parameters is a constant balancing act. However, by considering the right kind of monitoring, you can become more confident that your students are free to learn in a safe and protected environment.