STAYING SAFE ONLINE

Published by Rachelle Dene Poth | Comments by Al Kingsley

Staying safe online, whether learning in school or at home...

With the future of education shaping up to be blended - whether in school, remote or both - being safe online is key.

But although teaching and learning is increasingly technology-based, the greatest contributor to online safety is great digital citizenship education, backed by the promotion and modeling of a positive digital culture – and then technology plays a role to support those elements.

I've worked with many schools across the country, so thought I would share some tips for online safety that I've encountered along the way…

Whole-school approach

A whole-school approach to staying safe online is essential. Every member of staff in every department – and teachers and students alike – all need to be fully engaged in the drive to keep themselves and others safe online. Understanding the 'why' behind the actions goes a long way to helping students (and other members of staff!) build their digital citizenship skills, know their online rights and develop their online responsibilities.

Modeling is also important and that's where both teachers and parents can help. We all know that young students' behaviors are shaped by the adults in their lives, so in addition to teachers' actions in the classroom, it's important to try to engage parents, get them on board with the school's objectives, and encourage them to model good digital citizenship at home. This reinforces to students that it's not just a 'school' thing; it's about digital skills for real life.

Boosting teachers' knowledge

The important thing with technology is to remember that teachers don't have to be the expert in the room; it's perfectly okay to learn from the students themselves. For example, students can often provide the teacher with insights into their online worlds that they can learn from and perhaps even incorporate into their digital citizenship practice to benefit others in the school.

Another amazing forum for teachers to discuss approaches with colleagues and to gain their feedback is Twitter. Sharing online safety tips, providing fresh ideas and valuable information on why certain things perhaps don't work, as well as why they do, helps every educator to expand their knowledge.

Being safe… and remote

Being at home in isolation can give all of us (not only students) a false sense of security and protection when online. Sometimes, being online alone means it's easy to react to posts on social media and throw out comments without thinking them through – completely forgetting that there's a huge audience out there in the process! It's easily done, especially when students are cocooned at home and there are no real repercussions.

So it's really worth repeating and reinforcing the digital citizenship basics (e.g. "Don't post anything on social media you wouldn't want your grandma to see" and so on), to remind students that it's not just an audience of their peers out there; it's also their family, people they don't know, and (for older students) maybe even potential employers that will see (or look back through their social media to review) how they act online.

Get parents on board with tech

Schools can play a really valuable role in ensuring parents are providing a safe online environment in a technological sense for their children at home. The reason why many don't, is that they simply don't know how to. So, engaging with them and empowering them to be able to apply parental controls or filters, for example, can be really effective. Schools can do this in various ways: via online Teams sessions, 'tips' emails, video exemplars, and so on.

And finally… the supporting technology Of course, schools and districts must also ensure they have online filtering and context-based keyword monitoring in place. And if they have a mechanism for students to be able to ask for help or report any issues or worries, from wherever they are to a teacher who they trust, that's a great method of additional online support.

The online environment is always changing; that's why equipping students with the knowledge and skills to be in control of their own online safety is so important. Digital citizenship can't be done in an hour's class once a week. It really needs to be infused throughout every subject, just like reading and writing. The aim is for these skills to become second nature, so regular reinforcement and repetition are essential to help students incorporate them into their digital skill sets as they move through their school careers and on into their adult lives.

Al Kingsley is Chair of two multi-academy trusts in the UK, appears regularly as a guest or host of EdTech podcasts, is author of "My Secret #EdTech Diary" and CEO of NetSupport.