

Online safety is paramount



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Even as adults, we may not be totally up to speed with every aspect of digital citizenship.

There are nine key areas – passwords, privacy, personal information, photos, property, permissions, protection, professionalism and personal brand (first defined by US educator and author Vicki Davis) – and I can tell you now that if everyone kept their personal information safe, didn't share birthday dates online or photos that reveal crucial background information about their homes, incidences of burglary and ID theft would be much lower!

There's a lot to take on board, so it's never too early to start introducing digital citizenship to even the youngest learners. In a primary setting, teachers may choose to begin by focusing on just a few of these, for example:

- Not sharing personal information.
- Keeping passwords secret.
- Telling a parent or teacher if pupils receive a message that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Not sending photos to people they don't know.
- Not downloading anything without permission from parents or teachers.

Covering these bases introduces the idea to pupils that they have a responsibility

to keep themselves safe online but they can still speak to an adult if something happens that is out of their control. This way, they can learn to participate safely online and gain the benefits from all the internet has to offer, without becoming caught up in its darker side.

TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

Communication is the bedrock of all our interactions, whether virtual or in person. For the youngest children, that starts with learning the concepts of being kind, respectful to others and so on. Practising these skills in person is the first step before they then transfer them to the online world as digital citizens.

Having conversations with pupils about how and why we need to be so careful when using devices and on the internet is essential to ensure a thorough understanding right from the start – and providing a safe learning environment for pupils to take their first steps online is key. Schools can do this in two ways: firstly, by locking down and controlling what pupils have access to online to prevent exposure to unsuitable content.

After all, they need to be able to make mistakes in safety – it's how we learn! Secondly, teachers can use safe spaces within the school's protected setting for pupils to practise the skills they have learned, for example by employing

child-friendly search engines such as Swiggle, using appropriate online games to teach the pillars of digital citizenship, like Google's Interland, and introducing children to the concept of social media in a completely safe manner by using a solution such as GoBubble.

The other side of the coin is reporting. Pupils must know where to go to report any problems they may have (online or in person) and, most importantly, feel comfortable in doing so. We're all aware now of the "Everyone's invited" website. To date, it has received over 16,000 reports of sexual abuse from all educational settings – including some from primary level.

Within the framework of digital citizenship, it has been a catalyst for schools to renew their efforts to ensure there are safe pathways for young people to report issues of any kind, whether they have a problem themselves or are worried about a friend.

However, for some, reporting a concern face-to-face can be embarrassing, depending on the nature of the abuse or interaction they have had. So providing a means for digital communication (i.e. a form on the school website or a tool that specifically allows pupils to report concerns) ensures that there's a pathway for everybody to find a trusted member of staff to confide in.

PARENTS

Schools can play a significant role in enabling parents to have confidence in their children's technology use by regularly updating them with developments such as the latest online trends, giving them tips on how to navigate online safety at home, and suggesting approaches on how to talk to their child about the virtual situations they may encounter.

Where device use is concerned, within the home, parents can start with the very simple policy of always having an 'open door' to ensure that they have a degree of supervision over what the child is doing online.

Some may prefer to make sure that all home technology use only happens in a communal area, so other members of the family can keep an eye on children's technology activities too and can redirect them if needed.

Parents can go further than this by setting parental controls for access, as well as boundaries on how long devices will be used. It's all about establishing good habits from an early age and ensuring children don't get carried away using technology for hours at a time.

Lately, the attention has switched from simply focusing on the length of time they are on the device, to what they are actually doing on it and whether it is constructive and/or productive, e.g. research for homework or learning how to do something that interests them, rather than just being on social media for hours.

Schools can also help parents to understand why certain rules are in place, for example, reinforcing that the age guidelines for different social media platforms are applied to keep their children safe from content that they simply should not be seeing at a young age. Parents can then monitor their children's social media use with new understanding.

PEERS

A popular and effective way to strengthen digital safety throughout a school is to implement a Digital Ambassador programme. I've seen this be highly successful in a number of primary schools. There are some superb programmes available (e.g. eCadets and iVengers) that coach the older children in school to be online safety experts.

These 'ambassadors' then promote the safe and responsible use of technology to younger pupils. The ambassadors' voices often carry more weight than that of the teacher and, when the younger pupils have problems or are worried by something that has occurred online, often it's easier for them to tell someone closer to their own age first – and the ambassador will then report it to the member of staff in charge of the programme.

Interactive, whole-school programmes like these help build digital skills for life. They develop a sense of responsibility in how pupils conduct themselves online and a sense of pride in how they have helped others, as well as empowering them to recognise – and speak out – when things are not as they should be.

MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH

Even though the virtual world is constantly evolving, the essential pillars of digital citizenship still apply, whatever age we are.

The success in sticking to them comes from the understanding of why they exist and how they help to create an amenable online environment where everyone can participate safely.

Schools, parents and pupil digital ambassadors all have a significant role to play and the unique emphasis of each approach ensures that the key learning points are all covered multiple times, with at least one voice striking a chord with pupils.

STAY UP TO DATE

Digital trends change quickly and being aware of what's out there, as well as having quality resources on hand to use with pupils, is half the battle. Some great sources of information for teachers and parents include:

- ChildNet (<https://www.childnet.com/>) – Online safety resources and toolkits for parents/carers and teachers.
- Common sense education (<https://www.commonsense.org/education/>) – Example digital citizenship lesson plans for Years 1-6
- NSPCC (<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>) – Advice on how parents can talk to children about online safety.
- CEOP ThinkUKnow (<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>) – Online e-safety toolkits and resources for teachers.
- InternetMatters (<https://www.internetmatters.org/>) – Online safety advice for parents of children aged between six and 10-years-old.
- Childline (<https://www.childline.org.uk/>) – Cyberbullying information for teachers and older children.
- Internet Watch Foundation (<https://www.iwf.org.uk/>) – Advice about and reporting of child sexual abuse content.

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