

SAFER INTERNET DAY 2022: EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO BECOME RESPONSIBLE AND RESPECTFUL DIGITAL CITIZENS

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Al Kingsley, Group CEO at NetSupport, chair of a Multi-Academy Trust and an AP Academy, and ambassador for the Digital Poverty Alliance, discusses how schools can help teach students respectful and responsible online behaviours and awareness on this year's Safer Internet Day.

This year's Safer Internet Day theme, 'exploring respect and relationships online', emphasises the need to establish these behaviours amongst children, who are increasingly accessing the internet at younger ages. In fact, an [Ofcom report](#) found that more than 80% of 3-4 year olds went online in 2020.

Children were no exception to the inevitable increased reliance on technology throughout the pandemic, as we all became more dependent on the internet for entertainment, education and socialisation. While facilitating countless positive interactions and connections, this increase also intensified the exposure of children to users with harmful motivations with the Internet Watch Foundation finding that 2021 was [the worst year](#) recorded for online child sex abuse.

With the recent draft [online safety bill](#) accused of failing to address the most serious instances of abuse, schools must take immediate action to help young people become thoughtful and safety-conscious citizens of the internet, allowing them to participate in and contribute to digital culture whilst remaining safe and happy online.

Digital citizenship in the curriculum

Digital citizenship describes the skills and knowledge that allows appropriate and responsible use of the internet. The increasing digitisation of classrooms over recent years gives schools not just the responsibility and opportunity to incorporate essential digital citizenship skills into the curriculum.

While digital etiquette and behaviour can be addressed in many ways, it is most effective to integrate education around online safety into all subject areas on an ongoing basis. Similar to how regular use of technology in class enables students to inherently improve their digital literacy, best practice and behaviour online should be reinforced via lesson plans that incorporate key issues into the curriculum.



Some easy ways that this can be adopted are outlined below.

Social media and digital footprints

Teachers could encourage students to think about how they present themselves online and introduce topics of data privacy or digital footprints by imagining what a fictional character's social media might look like. This opens discussions around discrepancies between what people present on social media and what's real, helping children become more aware of fake profiles trying to mislead them online as well as addressing concerning issues related to social media usage and mental health.

Mis- and disinformation

With phrases like 'fake news' now common vernacular, students must be able to analyse and examine information online and discern trustworthy sources. As part of research projects, students could be asked to justify their inclusion of information by referencing and identifying its source. By engaging with information in this manner, students will learn to identify false information online whilst also gaining essential critical analysis skills which are required across many subjects throughout their education.

Behaviour to others online

Respectful and kind behaviour online should be at the core of any schools' digital citizenship education. As with face-to-face relationships, students must understand

that online interactions are with another human being, one with their own thoughts and feelings. Digital codes of conduct or student policies can encourage children to take responsibility for their behaviour online and ward against issues of cyberbullying or online abuse.

Additionally, schools should have reporting mechanisms in place which are equipped to handle instances of online bullying or harassment. Staff responsible for student safeguarding should also be aware of the increased targeting of minority groups. With significant recent spikes in online [hate speech](#), schools should be prepared to address these risks with tact and sensitivity, ensuring young people have the space and confidence to report prejudiced abuse.

All fun and games?

The internet can appear to offer the world at our fingertips – or at least new ways of enjoying and connecting with it. Particularly for children who are 'digital natives', exposed to technology from birth, online dangers can go overlooked. Whilst the internet's long and varied list of benefits should be acknowledged, it is imperative that online harms such as bullying and misinformation are addressed. By including a well-rounded digital education within curriculums, schools can arm their students with the skills, behaviours, and knowledge to engage with technology and the internet responsibly, respectfully, and critically as active and savvy digital citizens.