

# Navigating the Shifting Sands of Online Safety

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Schools know only too well how tricky it is to keep students safe as they learn online.

**H**owever, the issue has become increasingly complex over the last couple of years as education at times moved out of the classroom, into the home and often out of school hours. Some students were lucky enough to be supplied with school devices (which may come with a degree of technological protection), while others did their best to continue learning via their parents' smartphones or shared devices in the home.

All independent online activities expose young people to risks, regardless of what device they're on, so what's the answer to shielding them from the dangers?

## Lay the foundations

We know that the internet changes all the time – and therefore, so do

the risks. A foundation of digital citizenship education is crucial to enable young people not just to identify what the dangers are, but be empowered to keep themselves safe with actions, whether that is making the right decisions, talking to a trusted adult or reporting online abuse to a service provider.

Schools go to great lengths to provide a secure online environment in which students can learn with a teacher and try things out for themselves without putting themselves at risk. For example, many well-thought-out solutions are available for younger students that act as a safe training ground for using social media and learning digital citizenship skills, such as [Natterhub](#), [GoBubble](#) and [PopJam](#). In addition, students can learn from one another. Schemes that encourage student digital leaders, e.g. [i-Vengers](#) or [Childnet](#)

[Digital Leaders](#), can be a great starting point for engagement for online safety issues. Often, peer-led initiatives can be very successful, as students feel more comfortable talking to and confiding in people their own age.

## Technology is key

Many schools will agree that identifying and prioritising students engaged in high-risk activity is the nub of any online safety policy. But in reality, it's virtually impossible for teachers to monitor the online activity of all the students in their classes throughout the school day as well as teach them, which is why it's vital that the technology students use for learning offers that protection.

Keyword monitoring technology is a highly effective way to recognise students who are engaged in

potentially risky activities. However, context is crucial: a good platform should ideally go beyond simply highlighting worrying words or phrases and analyse the context in which students are using the terms, i.e., whether they are accidental, academic or indicative of risk.

Some products may even capture screen images or screen recordings to evidence that activity, while simultaneously 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.

System alerts can also play a huge role in keeping students safe. If staff are alerted when a student is engaged in risky activity, they can act quickly to address the issue either directly with them and/or monitor them to ensure they are being effectively shielded from online harm. The alert also provides the insight required for staff to determine whether to contact a student's parents or guardians if they feel that the child needs to be protected outside of school hours.

## Keeping up

Edtech solutions that keep track of the trending words and phrases students use can help to highlight school-wide topics of concern, as well as individual issues. For example, in our solutions, a 'word cloud' (powered by the keywords students are triggering in real

time) helps online safety staff see the exact topics that are trending across the school. This extra insight enables a whole-school approach to safeguarding, where staff remain informed about new terms or escalating trends, enabling them to intervene where necessary to ensure students' safety.

## Everyone learns

It's not only school staff who can learn from online safety technology: the information gathered can also offer 'teachable' moments for the students and allow staff to explain concepts or dispel harmful myths before things take hold.

Some solutions allow schools to add their own eSafety terms to their safeguarding solution's pre-supplied database and share them with others. This kind of collective learning ensures greater awareness of trends or terms and benefits staff and students alike – and 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.

## Futureproofing students' online safety

EdTech use has certainly escalated over these last two disrupted years. For teaching and learning, it's been incredibly significant as it has compelled schools to bring themselves up to date and fully

embrace the possibilities digital-led learning can bring to students and staff for the future.

On the flip side, the issue of online safety remains. As we know, the digital environment is constantly shifting, which means finding the fragile balance between allowing students the freedom to learn within safe parameters while shielding them from inappropriate content. But as the internet evolves, so do the safeguarding technologies that protect students, so schools can be assured that edtech vendors are doing all they can to ensure their solutions will roll with the times to help staff support the latest elements of safeguarding.

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