SAFER INTERNET DAY: KEEPING STUDENTS SAFE ONLINE IN 2022

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On Safer Internet Day, Al Kingsley, CEO at NetSupport, explores how school leaders can encourage students to be responsible digital citizens.

Even prior to the pandemic, UNICEF estimated that approximately 175,000 children access the internet for the first time every single day, equating to one child every half a second. Since the onset of Covid-19 nearly two years ago, digital uptake amongst children and young people has soared, as everything from school to socialising shifted online.

Digital platforms undoubtedly facilitate some positive and meaningful interactions for young people – whether that is via social media, gaming or streaming platforms, each medium offers a digital connection and sense of community. However, with the rise of these platforms also comes an increase in risk and exposure to those users with harmful views or motivations.

Further, the draft online safety bill which was recently criticised for its perceived failure to address the most serious instances of abuse, demonstrates that urgent action is needed from teachers, parents and guardians to help combat the more pernicious sides of the online world.

What's more, after being in the safeguarding spotlight, the independent sector has been urged by the ISC to take the issue of digital (and of course in-person) abuse "very seriously". Here, I explore how heads and senior leaders at independent schools can start to tackle the recent wave of online toxicity and encourage students to be responsible digital citizens on this year's Safer Internet Day.

Fortify school safeguarding systems

Schools and educators are bound by statutory mandates to protect and uphold the wellbeing of children and students in all its forms – and digital safety is no exception.

In addition to the Keeping Children Safe in Education statutory guidance, the Department for Education (DfE) bolstered school staff's ability to help keep children safe online and complement curriculum content in subjects including relationships and sex education, citizenship and computing via its resource page in 2019.

Some edtech vendors have also released free, best-practice guides which collate trends and developments all in one place to help teachers and school staff stay abreast of the rapidly changing digital landscape.

Most, if not all, schools will have some form of digital safeguarding system in place, but with the latest Covid-19 absence data indicating as many as one million children – one out of every eight pupils – were absent from school in the final week of January, and a further nearly 10% of teachers off, it's essential that infrastructure can cope with the increased threats and complications posed by blended learning.

Keeping students safe while surfing the web can prove something of a challenge even in 'normal' face-to-face environments, but sporadic home learning certainly presents further hurdles from a safeguarding perspective.

When formulating a digital strategy and considering procuring tools or solutions, be sure to always prioritise safeguarding – undertake a thorough audit of your existing assets to gauge whether they are meeting your specific goals, and then consider where gaps in provision might exist.

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Empower students to develop their digital confidence

However, with almost half of independent school teachers reportedly considering quitting the profession altogether due to out of control workloads and increased stress, it's clear that staff have enough on their plates as it is.

Opting for automated solutions with integrated toolkits can help cut down on time spent by staff with the additional responsibility of SGL position manually monitoring, by assessing concerning activity, identifying at-risk students and reporting online safety trends across all locations, wherever students might be logging on.

Pupils can also explore topical wellbeing issues on their own terms by accessing a suite of resources with information, guidance and signposts to relevant helplines dedicated to tackling a range of issues, including bullying, grooming and substance abuse.

At Deira International School in Dubai (winners of the ISC's 2021 Digital Technology in Learning award), which I was lucky enough to profile for My Secret #EdTech Diary, an integral part of digital strategy is the leadership of the student body.

Students are central to not only creating but developing and implementing digital strategy, which Simon O'Connor, director, argues has helped them to "learn about the leadership process and how to engineer change".

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Be inclusive in your approach

Although digital saturation rates have never been higher, not every child will have the same access to an equal speed/quality of technology or devices. Whilst there has tended to be a significant divide between children attending independent schools and state schools, it's crucial staff don't assume a uniform level of access and risk complacency in digital inclusion goals.

Additionally, some students belonging to minority groups are particularly at risk of being victims of targeted abuse, including those from BAME, LGBTQ+, gender or neurodiverse backgrounds. Sensitively addressing these risks for especially vulnerable students and providing a safe space for young people to share and report prejudiced abuse is crucial, particularly given the recent spike in online hate speech.

Above all else, it's crucial to adopt a nuanced and measured approach to the task at hand. Stress to students the huge benefits offered by the internet, like social connections or having a whole world of knowledge at their fingertips, while simultaneously acknowledging the very real risks posed including bullying and grooming.

Like it or not, the internet and social media are here to stay – scaremongering or a total ban on devices isn't likely to yield the desired results of switched on, digitally-savvy young people – so aim to provide a balanced view which encapsulates both the 'pros' and 'cons' of the online world. The strongest approaches are joined-up, coordinated ones which involve schools and parents/carers syncing up to work in tandem.