Digital Safety

OLIVER HOUSE
SCHOOL

E-SAFETY

Adapted from the E-safety workshop for parents given by Karl Hopwood at Oakwood on Wednesday 23 May 2018 (karl@esafetyltd.co.uk)

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Aims of the workshop:

- To consider what children and young people are really doing online as opposed to what they might say that they are doing.
- To explore some of the risks and benefits of using the internet and online communications.
- To provide some possible solutions.

We need to educate children, not simply block and ban them from the internet. Blocking worked a few years ago, but now young people all have mobile devices which allow them to access the internet wherever and whenever they want to and so they need to know how to protect themselves when things go wrong. Of course there is a place for some blocking – as parents we are confident and comfortable in doing this for the offline aspects of our children's lives, we should also feel confident to do this with the online aspects too. It is clearly inappropriate for children to access adult content and we can take steps to block this as parents. More information can be found at www.internetmatters.org.

Whilst parents can block content very effectively and exercise some control over what their children may be accessing at home and even on their own devices, but when they spend time at a friend's house we have no idea of the levels of filtering that are in place. For that reason we need to ensure that when our children come across challenging content online they feel able to come and ask for help and support as necessary. Keeping the channels of communication open is crucial.

There are many risks that children face when using the internet, some which have existed for generations. However the internet brings with it a couple of issues which mean that children and young people can be particularly vulnerable.

1. Children and young people tend to use the internet (at least initially) in places where they feel very safe. This is because we tell them that they are safe and want them to feel that way. Home and school are places that we need children to feel safe and secure in and staff and parents work hard to ensure that this is the case. However, in doing so, we encourage children to approach their use of the internet with a false sense of security. In their eyes, nothing can go wrong – because they are in that safe place.

2. We know from scientific research, that children's capacity to understand risk develops after adolescence because the parts of the brain that govern risk are not fully functioning until this time. This means that children don't have the same appreciation of risk as adults – this is actually a good thing in some respects as without this, children and young people would not take the risk to tell their first lie of consequence, or do their first noble thing. Indeed, it is only their inability to appreciate and understand risk that allows them to do those things that we as adults consider to be both incredibly brave and foolish, the things that really characterise adolescence, the series of really dangerous decisions that you have to make to become an adult.

These two factors taken together can form a potentially toxic mix, meaning that some children and young people will take real risks without any thought for future consequences.
It is important to remember at this point that we were all children once, we all did the foolish things, the difference – and it is a crucially important one – is that our foolish activities were not permanently recorded.
Consequently, informing children about risk involves:

•   Frequent reinforcement – which means both at home and at school.
•   Providing children with examples – things from their real life that actually mean something to them.

We must infuse children with the media literacy that helps them to understand about the immortality of the information that they put up online. This is vitally important. The way to do this is NOT to say don't use this, but to say for example, "look at how this rumour flooded through the network".

Encourage children and young people to carry out the experiment for themselves. When they have witnessed the speed and diffusion of how something goes through a social network they will be much more likely to think twice about what they post. There are many examples in the media which we can use to initiate discussions with our children – they will have an opinion and are more likely to consider some of the issues if we share some of these stories with them and ask them what they think.

How can we best protect children and young people?

The most effective way to keep children and young people safe online is to ensure that they have someone that they trust who they can talk to if something goes wrong.

Education and empowerment are much more powerful tools than blocking, banning and monitoring.

If we really want to keep children safe on the internet, we need to equip them with the right tools. Children are infinitely resourceful, monitoring and filtering will not always stop them from accessing what they want to access, but it could stop them from working with us to become better online citizens.

Useful websites:

www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents   www.internetmatters.org   www.net-aware.org.uk
www.saferinternet.org.uk   www.connectsafely.org   www.childnet.com/kia/parents
www.commonsensemedia.org   www.vodafone.com/content/digital-parenting