e-Safety

empowering positive behaviour

Alan Mackenzie - February 2015

About the author

e-Safety has been a passion of mine for a very long time, I love technology and the huge benefits that can be realised through global connectivity and collaboration. I am a strong believer that e-safety is an enabler, not a showstopper. It should never be a barrier to innovative use of technology.

For many years I was the e-safety lead at Lincolnshire County Council, Children's Services, raising initiatives across all schools, police, the voluntary sector and others with positive outcomes and a significant increase in e-safety awareness

I became a CEOP Ambassador many years ago, which was a great starting point, but there is far more to e-safety; the world is changing, technology is diversifying at an extraordinary rate and the use of technology by children is growing massively.

Since establishing my own consultancy I have worked with hundreds of schools, charities, commercial organizations, police, local authorities and many others. Whether that's for training, research, strategic initiatives, whitepapers, guidance and so much more, I love the diversity. But most of all I love the challenges of empowering others in a world of technology where the future is a blank canvas.

Copyright

Introduction

I doubt many would disagree that e-safety is still in its infancy. We haven't got an awful lot of history to understand what impact online life actually means in terms of behaviour, and due to the nature of technology it's also a subject area that continually expands and evolves at an extraordinary rate. We had the first connected computers in the late 1960's and early 70's in order for academics to share information and research (Arpanet) and the prediction that there will be anything between 25 and 50 billion connected devices in the next 5 years is simply staggering.

Whilst some will shy away from technology and say they're not really interested (is that really possible?), others will embrace the many advances that technology gives us in our personal lives, our business lives, and of course education.

Disclosure

Over recent months I have been completely inspired by the ethos and vision of eCadets to the point that we now work in a close, long-term relationship. I am extremely privileged to be an eCadet Officer.

The Bad News Culture

Some time ago I remember reading an article in a psychology magazine which alluded to the fact that we're living in a virtual bad-news bubble where we're perpetually looking over our shoulder, and I found that really interesting.   In the context of e-safety, headlines such as the following are commonplace:

•   Tablets and smartphones affect the social development of children.

•   Video games make children violent.

•   The craze of taking selfies 'feeds' eating disorders.

•   Tens of thousands of children at risk of cyberbullying because of [insert latest app…]

The fact is, some of what we read is simply lazy reporting intent on expanding this bad-news bubble, and yet it's not surprising that we have so many parents intent on over-protecting their children from the 'dangers of the net.' It's well known that this so-called 'helicopter parenting' does little to protect the child, and arguably introduces a greater level of risk due to a lack of resilience. Quite often this is down to the fear of the unknown, which takes us back to the fact that technology is often seen as the risk.

e-Safety Education - it's a struggle

It's partly due to the fast-moving nature of technology that e-safety education has always struggled to keep up, but whilst technology (or rather technology providers) have a part to play, the fundamental principle of e-safety education is that it's about behaviour, and this behaviour can enhance risk, for example:

• Not knowing (how do you know what you don't know?)

• Not caring (apathy or disinhibition).

The former is a matter of education both at school and at home, the latter is about changing negative behaviours into positive ones, particularly disinhibition which is a huge area of psychology in its' own right.

Changing these two aspects to create a culture of positive behaviour is difficult as there are so many factors involved, not least of which is:

• What would be considered positive when e-safety is based on risk?

• Parental engagement is extraordinarily difficult.

• How do you keep up with all the issues? How do you find the time?

e-Safety is an umbrella term for much more than the important safeguarding issues, the wider aspects of digital literacy such as copyright and plagiarism, self-image, relationships, privacy and security, digital footprint and more has to be taken into account. We're even getting into the more psychological aspects such as why do people do what they do online, the effects of over-use of technology, addiction and much more.

What can we do?

The 'how' question is an interesting one and here we need to consider what isn't always useful first of all.

For some, e-safety education is standing in front of the children with a Powerpoint and going through important rules on how to stay safe: don't talk to strangers; don't download files; don't meet up with people you don't know; check the information you are reading is reliable, and much more.

Whilst there's nothing wrong with this as a 'knowledge check' and also to see if there are any risk areas or gaps in knowledge, we need to consider whether it is effective. Invariably children will give all the right answers because despite their parents fears many pupils do know the theory of what to do. But the theory is very different from real life.

What we must understand is that for many children and young people, risk-taking behaviour is a part of growing up. Some would describe this from the context of the moral compass, every now and again pushing the boundaries where you know that something is wrong but you do it anyway because it's fun, or exciting. Whilst this may be a concern let's not forget that negotiating risk can be a really good thing; for many, taking risks is a step too far, however risk-taking in a managed environment increases resilience and decreases the likelihood of harm.

There's also another thing to consider here particularly when it comes to younger children, and that's showing videos or animations that scares them. Emotions play a hugely important part when it comes to memory, and fear is one of the strongest emotions. From a real-world perspective, how many times have you seen or heard a parent say to their child, "Do you see that police officer over there? If you carry on being naughty he's going to come and arrest you, take you away and lock you up." But what we should be telling children is, "There's a policeman, if you ever get into trouble, are scared or you need someone to talk to, a police officer is always there to help you."

Where does that leave us?

In the words of Jean Piaget, "Learning should focus on development rather than learning, in discrete stages of development."

It means that this is no easy task, particularly for schools that have to balance so much just to keep heads above water. It means any initiative that is put in place to develop a culture of positive behaviour must have a number of fundamental aspects in place, for example:

- It can't be a one-off

- It must allow those positive behaviours to become habitual over time.

- It can't be time consuming.

- It must take into account the wider aspects of e-safety and digital literacy.

- It can't be a subject in its own right but is embedded alongside other aspects such as health and wellbeing, literacy and numeracy, personal development.

- It must empower the wider community and be progressive and relevant.

- That positive behaviour must be evidential.

- It must be fun, not scary!

One of the best schemes, if not 'the' best scheme I have seen is the eCadets. This scheme takes a long-term approach from an early age, it completely empowers the children and their peers, school staff, governors and the wider community with very little (if any) work required from school staff, who are already incredibly busy.

The eCadet Scheme

A select few of the positives are:

• It empowers pupils from nursery through to 18, split into three different age groups, to become the next generation of online safety leaders. The eCadets then go on to empower the wider community, including their school peers. This one element is brilliant for a number of reasons:

o More often than not children will speak to their friends and peers if they have a problem or concern.
o Parents and the wider community are far more likely to be engaged if the children are directly involved. This has a significant effect; parents are more likely to be assured that the children know what they are talking about, therefore taking away some of the fears they may have.

• It's pupil led and it's structured, little (if any) teacher time required.

• It rewards positive behaviour and encourages competition to celebrate achievement via half-termly challenges.

• Online discussion and collaboration is openly encouraged through secure and human-moderated features such as Bubble (an online chat/collaborative module) and Skype.

All of this adds up to structured, authentic learning and empowering opportunities, some of which are based on real-life experience. It allows the pupils to learn in an authentic, challenging and competitive environment drawing on creativity and inspiration of all who are involved. It allows staff and eCadet moderators to step in only when they need to. But best of all, it is empowering to everybody that is involved and gives parents the assurances and evidence that the children know what they are talking about, allowing them to enjoy the wonders of technology – **safely**.

Links and Resources

The eCadet Scheme

www.ecadet.zone

Free resources and further guides

Monthly newsletters for staff and parents; model
e-safety policy; surveys and much more

www.esafety-adviser.com

Online Video Training

www.esafety.academy

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