

eSafety and education in the United States: what this means for parents

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*Tijana Milosevic reflects on her research on eSafety education and asks whether school curricula are sufficiently engaging with young people, or if parents need to supplement what schools offer. Tijana is a postdoctoral researcher in the **Department of Media and Communication** at the University of Oslo, Norway. Her work focuses on cyber bullying, children and media.*

In the US, experts **have long pointed out** that eSafety advice provided to young people in schools exaggerates potential harms, despite growing research-based evidence of children's understanding of online environments and the resilience that they exhibit in the face of potential risks. The situation is similar in the UK, with **the Computing curriculum in England** providing broad guidelines and learning aims that schools should rely on when teaching eSafety. However, the potential ineffectiveness of eSafety messages begs the question of whether parents can rely on schools to deliver eSafety education, or if they should try to complement and compensate for such education.

Although there have, to date, not been many research-based efforts to evaluate eSafety curricula, **one such study** in the US assessed the materials that law enforcement officers used when delivering eSafety education to children in schools. It brought forth a number of critiques of eSafety education, corroborating the observations of eSafety experts.

An effective curriculum

Such eSafety education conflates disparate topics, from cyberbullying and grooming, to illegal downloading, spam and sexting, despite the fact that the skills that young people need to develop to address each of these are very different. For instance, developing the resources to address cyberbullying requires social-emotional learning, which is different from the straightforward instructions needed to combat malware or to avoid spam. Hence, preventing cyberbullying requires more significant effort than simply telling children not to do it. Children typically **are already**

know that they should follow this advice, and the problem is why they choose not to do so. A more effective curriculum would include teaching anger management and social pressure to 'join in', or researching risk and causal factors for bullying and cyberbullying appropriate to an age group, and then delivering evidence-based strategies to improve these factors.

Programme developers need to reduce their reliance on scare tactics and dramatic statements that use the highest victim rates available to convey the danger. While I am not aware of such curricular evaluations in the UK, eSafety messages tend to be similar to those in the US, which is why such conclusions may hold in the UK as well.

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'Digital citizenship' as 'the way forward'

While eSafety acquired a negative connotation among young people, the concept of 'digital citizenship' emerged. In my research interviews, digital citizenship tended to be characterised as 'the way forward' in teaching eSafety.

Although there does not seem to be a single agreed-upon definition, a number of interviewees characterised it as 'behaving online as one would offline', and 'making safe and responsible choices online'. In other words, the well-mannered behaviour that is expected in person should also be exhibited online. An important observation by Anne Collier, a long-standing commentator on eSafety who is developing a social media helpline for U.S. schools, was that digital citizenship should not become merely a re-branded term for 'eSafety'. It should be 'citizen-sourced' and not dictated from adults to young people.

Despite the popularity of digital citizenship thus far, there has been little evidence of the effectiveness of advice commonly provided in digital citizenship educational programmes.

A recently published study in *New Media & Society* by Lisa Jones and Kimberly Mitchell is a much-needed contribution towards an improved understanding of what might constitute digital citizenship advice that would resonate with young people. Their study tested the proposition that focusing digital citizenship specifically on increasing respectful behaviour towards others online, and increasing young people's online civic engagement activities could improve the effectiveness of educational efforts. They conclude that if 'digital citizenship' is indeed going to be embraced by schools as 'the way forward' in eSafety education, it should be well defined, while targeting specific educational goals and associated outcomes.

Increasing respect and support

Rather than providing examples of what types of behaviour children 'should' or 'should not' embrace, digital citizenship curricula whose stated goal is to 'increase respect and support' might want to provide guidance for educators on how to organise discussions on what 'respect' means to young people, what forms such behaviour could take online, and ask them to provide examples. Practising support for those who showcase talents or who provide opinions online is an example of skill-based learning, as well as identifying disagreements within children's own social networks and then exercising perspective-taking or using respectful language to express opinions.

In the light of such evidence, parents may be well advised to examine the curricula that their children's schools are using against these findings and to decide for themselves whether what their children are being taught is sufficient

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