

Why online safety needs offline guides

Social media has a dark side – but plenty of schools are arming their students with the tools and values they need to safely navigate their online activity, writes Fran Molloy.

There is little escape from the online world for today's school children, with research by Australia's eSafety Commissioner showing that two-thirds of Australian children aged six to 13 either own or have access to, a smartphone, as do 94 per cent of 14- to 17-year-olds.

And with social media increasingly embedded in young people's lives, many schools are coming up with innovative ways to educate students about its responsible use.

Nicola Forrest, principal of Cornish College at the edge of Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, is not a fan of the total bans that are coming into play in many schools, warning these strategies can be ineffective in teaching students how to detach themselves from their devices.

"Rather than total elimination, we're aiming for moderation – and role modelling," she says, adding that when teachers and parents acknowledge their own struggles with device over-use, frank conversations can take place.

Teachers are encouraged to model behaviour to manage their own device use, such as turning off notifications during staff meetings.

"Our message is, we can do this together, rather than, you must do this," Forrest explains.

Integrating Online Into Offline Instruction

"The online world, and social media, is so natural to these children, because they've grown up with it," Forrest says. In response, the principal believes that schools need to integrate their social media education into general life instruction, rather than treating it as a separate issue.

At Cornish College, this approach includes dealing with skills around the handling of social media through the lens of the school's core values of respect, integrity, creativity, compassion and courage.

Rather than introducing hard and fast rules, Cornish College teachers have the scope to approach device use from a behavioural angle, using common sense, Forrest says.

"If you're teaching a PE class and a student says, 'Can I get my phone out?' their teacher can say, 'Why? What are you going to do with your phone?' And that can resolve things pretty quickly."

She says that the school also draws on resources provided by the e-Safety Commissioner which help to explicitly educate young people about social media, arming them with tools to protect themselves.

Critical Thinking

Forrest says social media education needs to promote critical thinking and to be enmeshed with core values.

“The more we can create critical thinkers and entrepreneurial thinkers who are real problem identifiers, the better we’re going to be to equip kids to manage the pitfalls and navigate technologies that change far more quickly than we can ever keep on top of it,” she says.

Cornish College engages parents and staff through newsletters and other resources which include tools for understanding online safety.

Technology sustainability is also an integral part of the school’s focus on education for a sustainable future, Forrest adds, which considers the socio-cultural, personal and urban aspects of sustainability in conjunction with the natural environment.

She says that applying this lens of sustainability to online safety can help guide students to make better decisions.

Comprehensive Program

At St Leonard’s College, director of technology innovation Tim Barlow says that the school has implemented a comprehensive program to ensure students of all ages understand the nuances of navigating the online world safely and responsibly.

“Students in the Junior School explore online safety, not responding or being in contact with unknown people online, as well as looking at digital footprints and safeguarding personal data when studying digital citizenship,” Barlow says.

The curriculum expands in later years to include more complex topics such as the eSafety Commissioner Toolkit, respectful online communication, and the safe use of social media, he says.

The Brighton school also engages students’ families, in a push to emphasise collective responsibility towards online safety, he says. A highlight is the school’s collaborative year 7 family technology evening, where families navigate the online world by solving real-world problems together.

The college also employs unconventional methods to help students learn about cybercams, Barlow says.

“We even send our students formal phishing test emails to ensure they become experts at avoiding the all-too-common pitfalls of cyber scams,” he says.

External experts have been engaged to reinforce key cyber-safety messages for students and parents.

“Key messages from these experts are always to lock down privacy settings as much as possible in social media apps, especially around location services, and to not over-share your information,” he says.

Barlow echoes Forrest’s point that technology is changing fast, and hard-and-fast rules aren’t always flexible enough to cater for new online challenges.

“Maintaining open lines of communication is key,” he says. “Students need to know that they can come to their parents and teachers for help in any situation.”

‘Our message is, we can do this together, rather than, you must do this.’

Nicola Forrest