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Incorporating Online Safety in European Schools

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Key points

With the rapid development and spreading of technology, more and more young children have access to the internet and social networking websites. There, many dangers may be lurking, which kids won't be able to identify and confront if they have not been trained accordingly. This policy brief suggests that a lesson of internet safety, with the focus on protection of personal information, must be incorporated in European elementary school curriculums:

- Introduction of online safety subject in the last classes of elementary school curriculums, either as a new subject or incorporated to the already existing computer science
- Use of up to date media and teaching materials, according to the needs of each different country
- Focus on students truly understanding the seriousness of the threats and learning how to deal with them and not only recognize them

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Introduction

It is undeniable that technology and the internet has been expanding very fast in the last few years and is becoming prominent in every aspect of everyday life. As a result, children tend to start using the internet from a very young age when they do not possess the necessary tools and skills to do so safely. This becomes even more obvious when they start using social networking sites and applications where they tend to overshare personal information without thinking that it is visible to any other user of the said site/app. Such sites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc.) state in their statistics that the age range of their users starts at 13 years, even though most of them require that the user must be at least 15 or even 18 years old. This does not mean that children younger than 13 are not creating accounts in these sites, since it is relatively easy for them to just pick another age.



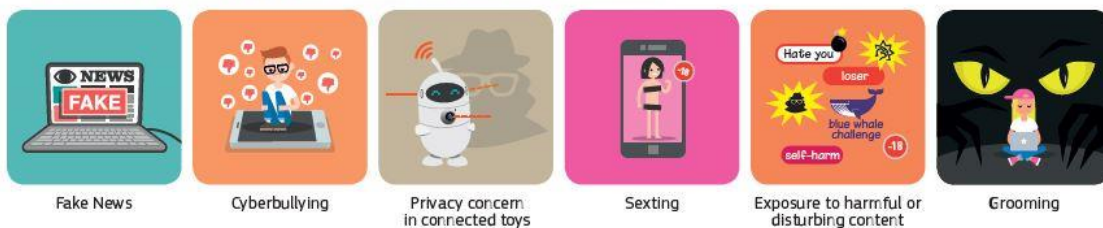
Where does the real problem lie?

Unfortunately, there are many occasions where kids face great risks online. Some of the problems that currently exist are exposure to harmful and inappropriate content, such as pornography and violence, cyberbullying and fake news.

GROWING UP IN THE DIGITAL SOCIETY



THE MOST FREQUENT AND EMERGING INTERNET RISKS



Source: Creating A Better Internet For Kids (www. Europa.eu)

However, an issue that could not only harm children mentally but also physically is that of online child predators. These are individuals who, at first, seem to be friendly and kind but their purpose is to lure young children and persuade them into giving them their personal information. This can lead to such individuals actually meeting children in real life and a lot of times physically or sexually assaulting them. Even if the situation does not get that far, these encounters may affect kids psychologically. According to the Crime Against Children Research Center, 1 in 25 children received sexual messages including attempts to also meet offline. Also, 1 in 25 children were requested to take sexual photographs of themselves. 1 in 25 is a very high rate, considering how many people use the internet every day. According to Eurostat, the number of individuals who have used the internet in the last three months in most European countries exceeds 75% while in others it even reaches 98-99% of the population.

This is a problem that should concern everyone. It is still difficult for official authorities to catch these predators since it is fairly easy for them to hide their identities and create a completely new persona online. Prevention, however, is the best solution in such issues.



That's why it is up to parents and teachers to provide kids with the appropriate knowledge to deal with such situations.

The European Union has already initiated many actions and policies about internet safety. Some of them are the “Alliance to better protect minors online” and the “Safer Internet Day”. Most of these actions presuppose that internet user cares for the safety of others and has the critical ability to identify threats and report them. This ability and other skills need to be taught to children first, before allowing them to wander on the internet freely.

Recommendations

One first step is that the parents teach their children how to be safe on the internet. This solution can't promise excessive results since parents may not possess such knowledge or may even be unwilling or unable to do such an action. Since no one can have control over how every single child is raised by the parents, subjects like these can be taught more efficiently and effectively by school teachers.

That is why a subject about online safety must be incorporated in European elementary school curriculums. It can't be left to the decision of the teachers if something like this will be taught or not and it should be mandatory in the schools of each country of the European Union. The EU member states have the obligation to protect their civilians and even more the minors, who are in the most danger.

A subject about online safety/internet safety should be introduced to the last classes of elementary school (5th-6th grade). These are usually the ages (11-12 years old) when children start developing the need to use social networking sites and applications since they start socializing more. A topic like this could be either incorporated in the already existing computer science subject or become an entirely new one, of the seminar type. Each country can decide the form of the subject and the teaching materials as long as it is certain that it will be officially included in the curriculum. What must be considered is that many times, school books and study materials are not regularly updated. When that happens with the subject of computer science, where technology evolves rapidly, many important developments are likely to be left out. Even if the EU member states are responsible for their own educational systems, the EU, as a whole, can help in setting joint goals and sharing good practices.

What will this subject include?

No matter how this subject will be taught in each country's education system, there must be specific points and goals to be achieved.



1. The students will be informed about the threats that exist in the online world. They have to know beforehand what they could possibly encounter. This includes cyberbullying, fake information and misleading content, inappropriate content, predatory individuals and scams. The purpose of this point is not to scare children away but instead to prepare them for realistic scenarios.
2. The students then, must learn how to deal with those threats, mostly by developing critical thinking. Teachers need to explain that it is important to be hesitant about anything they read/hear/see online since a lot of times it is not what it seems to be. Children have to understand that not everyone has good intentions and it is also difficult to filter all the content which concludes to a great amount of misinformation.
3. It must be explained why it is very dangerous to share excessive personal information. Teenagers tend to overshare information such as their age, location and sexuality, which leads to them being easily taken advantage of and able to be accurately located by anyone at any time. If they understand how important it is to be careful with letting others know of this information, the risk of them being assaulted (physically and mentally) can decrease dramatically. The advice of “not speaking to strangers” would be self-explanatory, anyone would think. In today’s online community, however, it is not certain that this advice will be followed. That is why students must know that strangers might approach them for many sly purposes and adults most likely never start talking to a child just to become friends.
4. Students, finally, must learn how harmful cyberbullying can become. Just as they learn not to physically hurt other people in real life, they must be taught that attacking someone verbally online could possibly have the same negative impact on them. Cyberbullying rates can drop in such a way.

These lessons should focus on students understanding why they are being taught online safety. Simply forbidding them to use certain web sites and applications and ordering them to not take part in actions without an explanation might turn out to put them in even more danger. They then might develop a feeling of stubbornness and do the opposite of what was ordered just because it was forbidden. That is why they genuinely need to understand that this is being taught for their own safety.

Conclusion

If this action is initiated, positive results are bound to happen. Firstly, young children will be at lower risk of being harmed online. They will also acquire skills and tools that will turn out useful not only when they roam the internet but in their every day life as well. Such skills are critical thinking and information processing.



Moreover, it can create a safer space online. With less cyberbullying and decreasing the treats that exist on the internet by the kids themselves, such great amounts of harmful content and interactions will be much more infrequent.

Finally, a positive effect that does not necessarily connect with the subject of internet safety is the creation of jobs in the field of teaching. This can become more prominent if the internet safety subject is introduced separate from the computer science lesson in schools. Not only teachers will be needed, but also psychologists, who can explain the behavior of internet users, and technicians, who know how the web exactly works.

This suggestion will only bring positive results but presents no major drawbacks as well. It might take some time to be successfully incorporated but we need to act fast to protect as many children as possible from now on. There does not need to excessive funding since the subject of online safety can easily be included to the already existing computers science lesson. What is needed is printing of new books and introducing of new sources and materials that are up to date with the technological progress of today.



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