

# **To what extent do practitioners in one primary school setting believe they effectively safeguard student's experiences of using social media and the internet?**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to discover the extent that practitioners within one primary school setting believed they effectively safeguarded student's experiences of the internet and social media. Beginning with a literature review, gathered from current research, the risks associated with the internet and social media were clearly defined, as well as policies and practice that should be in place to effectively safeguard children. Research was gathered from across the globe, due to the far-reaching influence and nature of the internet. Thus, all research relating to the impact of the internet and social media on children was relevant to this research project. The effectiveness of practice within the selected setting was then measured against this research, using interpretivist paradigms and a qualitative approach, in the form of a case study. Although this was a case study, relevant to the one setting, findings could be adapted and used as a blueprint for other settings, due to the current literature gathered and the contemporary issue of e-safety being discussed. Interviews with selected participants within the setting produced findings and a discussion of current practice. Whilst the interviews highlighted positive practice and in-depth knowledge on the risks to children, recommendations for improvement were identified and discussed, such as the limitations of current training and opportunities to embed e-safety into other areas of the curriculum.

## Literature Review

Households accessing the internet has increased over the years to an all-time high (Office for National Statistics, 2017), with children as young as three having regular access to the internet in some way (Ofcom, 2014). A report by the National Foundation for Education (NFER) found nine out of ten children regularly access the internet (Wespieser, 2015), and the biggest increase of internet use being between the ages of ten and eleven, when social media profiles double from 21% to 43% (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications (HLSCC), 2017). This demonstrates the need to educate children early on the dangers of social media and the internet, so they will be well equipped for online exposure (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), 2015; Edwards et al., 2016). For the context of this research, social media is defined as a platform whereby public profiles, demonstrating interests and personal information, allow users to connect to others to share information and form social relationships (Sarkar, Agarwal, Ghosh & Nath, 2015), while e-safety involves managing risks and ensuring personal safety during everyday use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Atkinson, Furnell & Phippen, 2009).



*Image available at <https://www.teachertoolkit.co.uk/2017/02/13/accounts-to-aid-revision/> (2018)*

## Benefits to Children

Undoubtedly, social media and networking brings endless opportunities for communication, self-expression and participation (Boyd, 2014), and allows connections with people all over the world, making life incredibly easy in terms of passing information (Chhachhar, Qureshi, Maher & Ahmed, 2014). Livingstone et al. (2017) discuss how parental mediation increases digital literacy and opportunities for children, but while restricting internet use may reduce the risks to children, it also limits digital inclusion and opportunities. Correspondingly, children are as likely to have a positive experience on the internet as negative according to Dugmore (2014), but no system can fully eliminate all risks (Pierce, 2012). It is ultimately the concern of parents and the children to decide if the risks outweigh the many positive

attributes of the internet and social media (Hewitt-Taylor, 2015). Finkelhor (2014) also raises the criticism that the internet is not as dangerous as some studies suggest, stating most research has been focused on the dangers to children, rather than exploring the possibilities that technology can provide to young people who are growing up with it.

### **Risks to Children using the Internet and Social Media**

Bullying in any form affects half of all children at some point and not just during school hours; due to social networks and smartphones, the cyberbullying phenomenon can potentially occur at any time and place (Scott, Dale, Russell & Wolke, 2016). Cyberbullying is the repeated attempt to cause harm or humiliate others through technological means, including texts, photos and email (Deniz, 2015). Cyberbullying is just as damaging as physical bullying, and all ages from early childhood to adolescence are at risk (Davison & Stein, 2014). In addition, text messages, pictures, and social media sites are being used to intimidate, harass, humiliate and stalk bullying victims (Paul, Smith & Blumberg, 2012). This can negatively impact children's mental health and create depression, anxiety and poor self-image (Richards, Caldwell & Go, 2015). Furthermore, while social media allows children to keep in touch with loved ones and explore their personalities, it also puts them in danger of accessing inappropriate content such as pornography and abuse (Pedersen, 2013; Fursland, 2011), due to the anonymity the internet provides to mask real identities (Hewitt -Taylor, 2015). The anonymity the internet provides, creates higher risks of grooming and sexual abuse as offenders can hide behind profiles and the internet, posing as children themselves (Williams & Hudson, 2013). Grooming is the process of building an emotional connection and trust with children for the purpose of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation (The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), 2017). These findings indicate child protection policies face new and complex dangers that are occurring from social media and the internet; growing dangers in terms of sexual abuse and exploitation (Appleton & Sidebotham, 2016), demonstrating the increasing need for greater understanding of how child maltreatment and sexual exploitation occurs through the internet (Parton, 2016).



*Image available at [https://i1.wp.com/www.fairmontschools.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/shutterstock\\_674413882.jpg?resize=1000%2C667](https://i1.wp.com/www.fairmontschools.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/shutterstock_674413882.jpg?resize=1000%2C667) (2018)*

Social media use is not always beneficial, and children are becoming older quicker compared to times when the internet was not so easily accessible (Willett, 2015). Huk (2016) recently investigated what effects Facebook, a social media website, had on children aged ten and eleven, concluding social media is now a permanent element of children's culture. Yet online socialising is increasing opportunities for individual and group bullying to occur, as well as making it harder to identify the bullies (Deniz, 2015). Contrastingly, these harmful risks do not affect all children and there are indicators as to which children are more likely to suffer from bullying and abuse. Studies by Livingstone and Smith (2014) and Maguire et al. (2015) have found that children's online habits do not change their offline behaviour, thanks to increased teaching of safety and awareness of risks associated with strangers; it is actually children who are at risk of abuse offline that are more likely to become online victims. Similarly, children who are lonely and have weaker social ties and smaller social networks are more at risk to cyberbullying and abuse (Betts & Stiller, 2014). However, abuse of children can happen anywhere, not just online, according to Williams' (2015) ethnography of the victims of child abuse and their families across the south-east of the UK.

### **Role of Teachers and Adults**

Educators need to ensure parents and children are aware of the damage that cyberbullying poses (Davison & Stein, 2014), and parents are relying on schools and teachers too much to educate children on online safety (Schaffhauser, 2014). Educating parents would therefore be beneficial, as lack of parental support increases the risk factors associated with being online (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). All adults must talk to children about internet safety, just like drug and sex education, to avoid negative consequences from being online (Donlin, 2012). However, there are many devices now able to access the internet, leading parents to feel un-equipped on how to monitor, protect or supervise their children while accessing the internet (Chhachhar et al., 2014). Yet teachers may also feel unequipped and be lacking in professional

knowledge of ICT (Šimandl, 2015b), so it is vital that adequate training be provided to staff, to build confident knowledge on using the internet and social media (Simpson, 2016). Training also ensures educators are aware of procedure and the multi-agency approaches their Local School Children's Board (LSCB) employ to safeguard children (Pearce, 2014).



*Image available at [http://www.cambridge.org/ru/files/2314/8491/7397/CPD\\_Events\\_Img.jpg](http://www.cambridge.org/ru/files/2314/8491/7397/CPD_Events_Img.jpg) (2018)*

Through teaching, children have learnt the dangers of talking to strangers and giving out personal information; they detect real identities in the way people speak, slang terms used, and if the person's views seem to fit with that of their offline peers (May-Chahal et al, 2014). Children may have developed ways of assessing new people online, but the need for deeper guidance on how to address unfamiliar situations still exists (Livingstone, 2014), as children are still vulnerable to exploitation such as grooming and being encouraged to post sexually explicit pictures from people they have not met face-to-face (Melrose, 2013). Perhaps even more so, now that mobile and game devices have led to many children going online without any adult supervision (Edwards et al., 2016). Correspondingly, a recent survey of nine to ten-year-old children in the UK demonstrated that children already have a deep awareness and understanding of dangers and how to stay safer online, but simply do not apply this knowledge to their own online behaviour (Scott, 2016). To combat this, authentic learning experiences should be provided through demonstrating safe and unsafe online behaviour, rather than just describing dangers (Vanderhoven, Schellens & Valcke, 2015), allowing children to make judgements and gain experience of appropriate online behaviour in a safe environment. In addition, teachers should share their own attitudes towards the internet and social media sites, including security and privacy risks, as potential role models (Šimandl, 2015a).



*Image available at <https://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/2%20computer%20users.JPG> (2018)*

Indisputably, cyber safety awareness should be taught to educate young primary children, as those who have not been taught how to protect themselves can suffer the serious consequences (Naidoo, Kritzingler & Loock, 2013) of being victim to grooming, sexual abuse or exploitation (NSPCC, 2017; Appleton & Sidebotham, 2016). The current Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, recommends all UK schools should teach digital citizenship from the ages of four to fourteen to combat the risks of social media and the internet, as the dangers are as real in schools as they are outside of them (Children's Commissioner, 2017). This can only be achieved through adult supervision and mentoring of children (Howard, 2017), as bullying and abuse that takes place outside of school still affects the victims during school, having a continued effect on academic performance (Roberts-Pittman, Slavens & Balch, 2012). Therefore, more teachers are being asked to monitor pupil behaviour outside of school hours and away from school grounds, urged by parents to intervene on issues such as cyberbullying (Roberts-Pittman et al., 2012). The effects of cyberbullying will undoubtedly be seen during school hours in lower academic achievement or missing school (Pendergast, Beavis, Muspratt & Thompson, 2013).

### **Expectations of Safeguarding Policies**

Arguably it is the responsibility of adults to raise awareness of online safety (Turan & Işçitürk, 2017), but it is definitively every adults' responsibility to safeguard children through supporting multi-agency safeguarding systems, and passing concerns onto the relevant parties, which in school would be designated safeguarding leads (Steele & Shabde, 2014). Safeguarding in England can be defined as protecting and preventing children from maltreatment and health impairment whilst providing them the best outcomes, growing up with safe and effective care (Hunt, 2014). Updates to Keeping Children Safe in Education (Department for Education (DfE), 2016) provides guidance on how to safeguard children; stating school safeguarding policies should now include the current online issues of cyberbullying and sending sexual images,

called sexting (Steele, Stone & Meyer, 2016), as peer on peer abuse is something all staff should be aware of and vigilant against (DfE, 2016). School safeguarding policies should unquestionably include online safety education, teaching children the acceptable use of technology, and appropriate behaviour and use of social media and information sharing (DfE, 2016). Ofsted's (2015) safeguarding inspections concluded school practice should educate children on cyberbullying, the internet, and social media, with evidence of policies freely and readily available online, in staff handbooks and on posters around the school, that are both adult and child suitable (UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), 2015; UKCCIS, 2017).

Ofsted found adults and leaders generally understood the risks of technology, including the use of the internet for bullying, grooming, radicalising or abusing children, and as a result have well developed strategies and policies in place to keep children safe; supporting children's understanding on how to keep themselves and others safe (Ofsted, 2015). However, in a 2015 survey using data from seven-thousand schools, Ofsted found discrepancies between teachers and leadership; some felt online safety was embedded in the curriculum well, while others and children, claimed it is mostly taught through assemblies (UKCCIS, 2015). The National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) states primary school children must be taught to safely, respectfully and responsibly use technology, how to recognise unacceptable behaviour and understand a range of ways they can report concerns about internet content and contact with others. This could be taught through personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) which is a non-statutory subject, so schools are free to design their PSHE lessons around needs of the pupil (DfE, 2013). Social media and internet safety could also be taught during Sex and Relationship Education as it is important to link to the teaching about online safety and vital to teach that the internet and social media are useful for building relationships and social networks, whilst also exploring the risks (Blake, Emmerson & Lees, 2017). Regardless of where in the curriculum it is taught, schools are under obligation to secure children's cultural, moral, social and mental development, preparing them for life's opportunities and responsibilities (PSHE Association, 2017).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Benefits and Risks of the Internet and Social Media**

All four participants remarked on social media and the internet's positive opportunities for socialising and communicating among students, validating the positive findings such as increased participation and self-expression described by Boyd (2014). Social media and the internet create connections allowing information to pass easily, according to Chhachhar et al. (2014) and Sarkar et al. (2015), which Participant C described as "*knowledge at our fingertips... [children] use it to do everything*",

indicating recognition of the positive aspect the internet provides users. Furthermore, Huk (2016) explains how social media is now a permanent element of children's culture, which resonates with Participant B's statement that "*there's massive learning potential from [the internet]*". Evidently, the participants are aware of the opportunities the internet offers children, but they also demonstrated in-depth knowledge of the corresponding risks.

Participants recognised the potential to view "*inappropriate material*" online, "*grooming*" and "*sexual exploitation*" as described in research by Appleton and Sidebotham (2016), and Pedersen (2013). The potential risk of cyberbullying was readily identified by all participants, corresponding to research by Scott et al. (2016) and Davison and Stein (2014). Participants disagreed however, when probed for their opinions of risks to children being universal. Factors including "*maturity*" (Participant B) and "*home life*" (Participant A) were identified for making some children more susceptible to the risks of social media and the internet, whereas Participant C claimed all children are "*equally vulnerable*". At first, Participant D echoed an identical response, however, quickly retorted that "*risk is in proportion to the supervision*", in agreement with Livingstone and Smith's (2014) findings that lack of parental support increases risks to children. Participant C and D further acknowledge that a limitation to teaching e-safety, which increases risks to children, is that they may not apply dangers they are taught to their own online activities, validating similar claims by Scott (2016).

### **Teaching e-safety**

It was recognised that teachers may need to support parents as they are "*much less aware*" (Participant B) of the dangers social media pose to children. This view that it is the responsibility of "*both*" (Participant D) parents and teachers to safeguard children and raise awareness of the dangers of e-safety, is corroborated by Turan and Işçitürk (2017). Furthermore, Participant B and C matched the opinion that it is both teacher and parent responsibility.

*I think it's both. It's a parent's job to look after their child...but at the same time we know that not all parents know what they're talking about, or do it. So then at the same time we've got to do it ... it's about reinforcing the message from both sides.*

(Participant B).

The claim that e-safety is reinforced from both sides also confirms findings by Roberts-Pittman et al. (2012). Additionally, Howard (2017) suggests teachers are more equipped to teach e-safety, which Participant D echoed; "*Teachers are obligated to keep themselves up to date, as part of their professional standards*" (Participant D), implying teachers carry a responsibility to update their e-safety

knowledge, while parents do not. Comparatively, Participants A, B and C independently made the suggestion to educate parents on e-safety, agreeing with findings by Livingstone and Smith (2014) and Donlin (2012), that lack of adult support increases risks to children. Yet, the issue of parental involvement and getting parents to attend e-safety classes was also raised during the interviews, because “*if they don’t think they need to go because they already know it, they’re not going to go*” (Participant B). To counteract this, the school website provides an alternative way to share e-safety with parents, having a feed with a direct link to “*a thing that’s done by COP and the NSPCC on our website, so that’s really up to date information on there for parents*” (Participant D).

### **E-Safety in Practice**

During the interviews, it emerged that the overall opinion of e-safety in practice was positive and included positive comments on the school’s firewall and blocked websites, such as YouTube, through the local authority (North Lincolnshire Council, 2016) to safeguard children using school equipment. Claims that all schools should teach digital citizenship to combat the risks of social media and the internet (Children’s Commissioner, 2017) were sustained by the practitioners when probed for their knowledge of when e-safety was specifically taught in the setting. Participants A, B and C readily identified ICT lessons as the main lesson where social media and internet safety could be discussed. In addition, Participants A, B and C identified PSHE lessons as additional opportunities to make cross-curricular links to e-safety, which due to being non-statutory, allows freedom to design lessons around needs of the pupil (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2014). However, there was no indication that the setting currently adapts PHSE lessons to suit pupils needs, only that e-safety and social media could potentially be taught during this time. During the interviews, it became apparent that a potential opportunity to introduce e-safety would be during a half-hour PSHE lesson, to ask what the children have been up to online and “*update our knowledge because we don’t know what they’re doing at home, and we won’t find out unless we talk about it and we’re not afraid to talk about it...being prepared for anything that comes up*” (Participant A). The opportunity this would create for peer sharing, could provide educators with insight onto the specifics that children require guidance and support on, according to Scott (2016).

Participant B spoke of how they believed e-safety could, and should, be promoted throughout all lessons, describing how they modelled their own e-safety practice to children, consistent with research by Šimandl (2015a).

*You teach them lessons discreetly, but then you drip feed it constantly. Like when we set up the school email addresses for the children...I said to my class, that I have a capital letter here and a number here, and why might I do that? ...we had a conversation about the safety of passwords. Drip feed those*

*skills in...every time you turn on a computer there should be a mention of e-safety.*

(Participant B).

Authentic learning experiences should be provided to children according to Vanderhoven et al. (2015), which Participant B clearly demonstrated in this example of e-safety in practice. Moreover, May-Chahal et al. (2014) state that children have learnt the dangers of talking to strangers through teaching, but Livingstone (2014) claims the need for deeper guidance on unfamiliar situations still exists, further justifying Participant B's teaching of the importance of a strong password, indicating the good practice being demonstrated in setting. Furthermore, school safeguarding policies are available online and all participants made the link of e-safety to the safeguarding policy and corresponding safeguarding training, demonstrating staff's awareness of the issue and how it is included in policy, adhering to Keeping Children Safe in Education (DfE, 2016), and supported by UKCCIS (2017).

Conversely, Participant D and Participant C were in opposing opinions on e-safety being taught in assemblies, such as during e-safety week, with Participant D insisting it is covered in assemblies, while Participant C claimed they "*don't recall doing anything*". Conversely, when questioned about their knowledge of e-safety being specifically taught in school, Participant A did not list assemblies as a learning opportunity, instead remarking "*if an incident happened then we would maybe address the issue in class if it required it, to refresh the kid's knowledge*". This suggests that, in practice, assemblies are not utilised to teach e-safety, although the Participant D mentioned one occasion where it should be spoken about. This could be due to being a whole school event, which may impact their suitability to teach e-safety in depth.

*...the problem with assemblies is you have that four-year group thing, so you don't want to be giving the same messages to year three as you are to year six, because the year six's know a lot more, and will have different sort of things they encounter online compared to year three's. You don't want to scare them, [there are] different concerns.*

(Participant B).

However, Participant B also stated e-safety should still be a regular issue addressed within setting, corresponding to Participant C's notion that children "*probably have one e-safety lesson a year*" and this is not enough to effectively get messages across to children about the importance of e-safety. It is interesting to compare the amount of detail Participants B and C go into regarding the potential for more training and opportunities to promote e-safety, compared to the limited responses of the other two participants. This could potentially be due to individual roles within setting, their experiences of practice and, due to this being a case study, their opinion and subjectivity giving them different perspectives on the same phenomenon. Critically,

Finkelhor (2014) states specific social media lessons are not required, as children should receive general education on social interactions and life skills, arguing that online encounters are simply extensions of offline ones. This indicates that assemblies could be well suited to teaching e-safety, if the content addresses general communication, and what qualifies as appropriate social interactions, supporting research by Wespieser (2015).

### **Barriers to Effective Practice**

Despite the demonstration of positive e-safety practice occurring within the setting, certain barriers were identified by the participants. A lack of in-depth training by a specialist was identified as a clear barrier to e-safety practice within setting. While the received training was described as “*delivered well*” (Participant A), it was discussed by Participants B and C that e-safety needs to be a separate, but in depth, training opportunity within setting. The current safeguarding training that covers e-safety was described as non-specific and criticised for not “*deepening understanding*” (Participant B) or building upon existing knowledge and experiences. Further comments included how the training and lesson are simply repeated, playing a video to children which indicates that current training is not up to date and therefore potentially poses a risk to children (DfE, 2016). When asked questions regarding adequate e-safety training being provided within school, Participant C reiterated Participant B’s opinion, stating current training “*doesn’t really mention anything to do with e-safety... it doesn’t cover it in depth*”. Ofsted (2015) concluded school practice should educate children on the internet and social media, which there seems to be some debate as to the extent this is carried out within setting. Participant B was hesitant in answering, possibly because their opinion did not reflect well on the settings e-safety training.

*Training needs to be from an outside agency, from someone who knows what they’re talking about ... because although a lot of teachers here know what to do, they’re not an expert in that field and haven’t got the case studies/examples to share, whereas an expert is doing it day in day out, and it’s their job role of promoting e-safety.*

(Participant B).

Šimandl (2015b) concluded that teachers may feel ill equipped and lacking in professional knowledge, which Simpson (2016) explains requires training, to build confidence. Participant C voiced their concerns over unfamiliarity with apps, and certain aspects of social media, such as how to post a video on YouTube or a blog. This unfamiliarity can be addressed through training according to Šimandl (2015a). “*It’s the thing about making sure people are aware of the new dangers...it is the evolving nature of the internet, every time something gets sorted, something else is going to come up*” (Participant B). Findings by Appleton and Sidebotham (2016)

validate the necessity for specialist training, due to the complex dangers occurring from social media and the internet. Furthermore, Parton (2016) details how a greater understanding of dangers and new technological issues are needed by child protection policies and practitioners.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, all participants showed current and in-depth knowledge of risks discussed in research, as well as keen observations on the positive opportunities social media and the internet can provide children. Participants discussed and demonstrated good practice regarding safe passwords and demonstrating the opportunity for practitioners to provide good role models for children. While research debates where the responsibility of teaching e-safety lies, practitioners discussed their practice and recognised their roles in reinforcing or filling gaps in children's knowledge. This demonstrates the positive safeguarding ethos and training of practitioners, which will benefit the experiences of children within setting.

E-safety in practice shows many positive attributes, from direct teaching of e-safety to participants sharing knowledge with children. However, the setting could improve further by definitively discussing social interactions and expectations of social behaviour during assemblies, and more frequently than it currently occurs. PSHE lessons could further be utilised to offer specific and tailored support to children regarding e-safety and their online behaviour, to ensure they are receiving relevant and needed education (DfE, 2016). Finally, participants voiced concerns over the current safeguarding and e-safety training they have received. Although positive comments were made, the need for specific and up-to-date training was identified, to ensure knowledge is in depth, current and detailed in order to better safeguard children's experiences of using social media and the internet.

### **Recommendations**

- Teach specific social media and e-safety lessons during PSHE lessons.
- Utilise time during Sex and Relationship Education and assemblies to embed messages about acceptable communication and online relationships.
- Refresh content and teaching resources of e-safety to suit the children's changing needs.
- Provide staff in depth and specialist training from an outside agency to better safeguard children's experience of social media and the internet.
- Ensure current training is specific and addresses employee concerns.
- Finally, the school need to ensure all staff attend and update themselves on current guidance, due to the rate at which the internet and social media evolve.

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