Communicating with parents about e-safety

According to Ofsted, whole-school community engagement is paramount in ensuring that the safe use of technology is communicated to all, writes Alan Mackenzie. So how can we talk to parents about keeping their child safe online outside of school?

One of the most important elements of e-safety is whole-school community engagement, but it can also be one of the most difficult elements. Parents need to play the pivotal role in educating their children about staying safe while using a variety of different technologies. It’s fine for a school to educate children within a ‘walled garden’ of internet filtering, student engagement and monitoring but this is not always the case at home, where the perception can be that the child is safe sitting inside the home browsing the net or playing online games.

Ofsted

Ofsted likes school newsletters (they are specifically mentioned in the e-safety Inspection Framework. The Ofsted e-safety Inspection Framework makes clear that whole-school community engagement is paramount to ensure the ethos of the school in educating children in the safe use of technology is communicated to all.

Schools already do a huge amount of work engaging with parents in a variety of ways such as email, text alerts, newsletters, parents evenings and more. However, there are common difficulties that schools may have which are not unique to e-safety when trying to engage with parents, and these can be frustrating, particularly when a lot of work goes into trying to communicate.

The difficulties

e-safety can be a particularly difficult area for a number of reasons.

- Parents are not interested or say they already know how to keep their children safe.
- ‘Johnny’s Dad is a technical wiz and we have everything blocked.’
- Busy personal/professional lives.
- Difficulties with parents’ evenings due to younger children.

Unfortunately this can leave the school with a dilemma: how do you engage effectively?

Possible solutions

There is no single solution that works, it is a matter of trying different things to see what one or two initiatives are successful.
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Parents’ evening

Parents’ evening is undoubtedly the best way to engage parents in e-safety as it allows in-depth questions and conversations, and also takes away the common dilemma of, ‘How do you know what you don’t know?’ However, parents’ evenings can be very poorly attended and sometimes need you to think out of the box a little to entice them in. Below (see box) are a few tips that have proved to be successful. You can either take them individually or use some of them to help form a strategic plan.

Newsletters

Newsletters are great for passing out snippets of information and Ofsted likes school newsletters (they are specifically mentioned in the e-safety Inspection Framework). The drawback is that they can take quite a bit of time to produce, and you may not always know what needs to be included. For this reason, I have produced a free e-safety newsletter specifically tailored for schools to send out to parents, host on the school website or get parents to subscribe to.

Providing the opportunity

Parental engagement is a really difficult area for some schools, but remember you can only do so much, you can’t be expected to do everything. Invariably there will be those parents who will never engage with the school unless something is wrong but by using these tips you can do your best to meet Ofsted’s expectations and give parents the opportunity to engage with the e-safety of their children.

Tips for a productive parents’ evening

- Don’t try to do it all by yourself. Do use the power of your school cluster to spread the message out far and wide.
- Do drip feed interesting facts to parents by whatever communications method you use.
- Don’t fill them with media scare stories but balance the positives with some of the risks.
- Don’t use the word ‘e-safety’. Invariably parents don’t understand that word, or associate it with something else. Be innovative and use other words.
- Do get the students involved, parents are far more likely to turn up to a parents’ evening if their children are a part of it. For example, you could poll the parents about their concerns or misconceptions, and then use the children to help answer these concerns.
- Do ask the students what their concerns are. Run a poll and develop a couple of the more popular concerns into a drama/play and get the children to act this out. This has the added advantage of showing that e-safety is not a technology issue but one of behaviour and risk.
- Do involve the PTA if you have one. This is usually an area they are passionate about.
- Do use your local media, invite them into the school before any event to discuss what you are doing so that they can put the message out for you. Invite them to the evening so that they can write a post-event article.
- Do use social media such as Facebook. Many schools see this is a risk but Facebook and other social media sites have a bad name simply because you only hear about the bad news
stories. There are ways to set up these services so that they can be used as ‘broadcast’ accounts; in other words a way for you to share information without allowing others to leave comments.

A note about using social media

This is by far the most successful way of engaging with parents and the rest of your community. Generally speaking it’s where the majority of the parents are, so embrace their social media activity as a tool for good. You could even poll the parents to ask if it’s a service they would find useful.

I highly recommend trialling the use of social media for a term. I haven’t visited a single school that would go back to their old methods of communicating with parents.

Author details

For 7 years Alan MacKenzie was the Service Manager at Lincolnshire County Council managing all IT services for around 350 schools as well as being the e-safety lead for Children’s Services raising initiatives for schools, police and the third sector.