

Keeping the connected generation safe online

Always-on connectivity has become part and parcel of today's society, with more and more people relying heavily on email, social media and web browsing.

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Children growing up in this era have unprecedented access to information, multimedia and interactive learning capabilities and are entirely comfortable using the internet for a variety of everyday tasks. However, while embracing connectivity provides new opportunities and is essential for schools to move forward, there is a lot of content online that is simply not suitable for learners. Keeping this 'connected generation' safe online is vital not only for parents, but also schools, universities and other educational facilities.

The internet is home to a wealth of information and offers new opportunities for educators to provide learners with engaging interactive experiences. For example, channels such as YouTube can be used for video demonstrations and information clips, which offer a richer learning experience than a simple lecture. However, while much value can be found online, there are also certain safety concerns with regard to learners, especially younger ones, on the internet. From cyber predators to unsuitable content, suspicious websites and a host of malware, there are numerous threats for the unwary or unaware. Ensuring the safety of underage browsers online should be a top priority.

Simply denying online access or blocking websites is no longer a viable solution. Schools and educational facilities need not only to include IT as part of the curriculum, but allow for access to online capabilities for research purposes if nothing else. One of the most common issues faced by schools is searching online, particularly given the many connotations of certain words, which may lead to inappropriate results. Certain security solutions work to protect browsers by blocking access to known nefarious websites; however this does not protect users from unknown dangers, nor does it take into account other content such as images, which use different search algorithms.

Content-filtering solutions

Leading browsers, such as Google, provide mechanisms to prevent this, such as Safe Search capabilities; however the reality is that children are curious and are so adept at navigating computers that they can easily find the setting to switch it off. Internet content-filtering solutions have, thus, become essential to ensure students continue to be able to leverage the benefits of the internet, without the dangers. These solutions enforce safe searching policies, eliminating unnecessary or inappropriate results from searches of both websites and images.

Another specialised tool that can assist in improving safety is YouTube for Schools, which controls the content available via the YouTube channel to educational and appropriate content. This enables teachers and students to benefit from the power of multimedia content, but prevents learners from being able to access irrelevant or dangerous materials. Again, this channel can be switched off and on, and to prevent learners from disabling safety features, security needs to be enforced through a security solution that prevents them from being able to do this.

Other vital security solutions include firewalls, antivirus, link verification and social media security solutions, all of which can

make online experiences safer and more enjoyable. In addition to implementing sophisticated security technology and best practices; however education is also a critical aspect. Aside from inappropriate content, there are a host of other threats online that the unaware could fall prey to, from cyber predators to phishing scams to malicious links that download malware onto systems. Learners need to be taught not only how to use the internet, but how to make sure they stay safe online.

The internet has a lot of valuable information and can be hugely beneficial for educational purposes. As a result, schools need to allow access to online content. However, they are also under obligation to keep learners safe from harm. Ensuring content is safe and appropriate, implement technology to enforce this, and following best practices around security are all essential, and must be backed up with education around security and safety practices themselves. Only in this way can educational facilities ensure students are protected while still enabling them to leverage the freedom and benefits of connectivity.

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