



# Embracing Digital Youth ~ Issue Brief

## Educator's Guide to Digital Risk

### Digital Risk

Young people have embraced the Internet and cell phones as a tool for socializing. They send messages and text, create a profile, post personal news, and interact. Much of this activity is fun and beneficial. The majority of young people make positive choices and are not at risk or being harmed.

Unfortunately, some young people may get into risky or hurtful situations. Research studies have demonstrated that the young people at greater risk when using digital technologies are those who are at greater risk in general. This is risk behavior that is now manifesting in a new environment. The following are the key risks.

#### Digital Aggression

Use of digital technologies to intentionally engage in hurtful acts directed towards another, including:

- *Flaming*. Online fights.
- *Harassment*. Direct hurtful messages.
- *Denigration*. Harmful material posted or sent to others.
- *Outing*. Sending or posting private damaging digital material.
- *Trickery*. Tricking someone into providing damaging digital material that is then disseminated.
- *Exclusion*. Excluding someone from an online group.
- *Cyberstalking*. Any of these acts that generates fear.

#### Digital Threats or Distress

Posting information that is a direct threat or "leakage" indicating emotionally distress and the potential for violence against self or others. Material can range from a joke to an imminent threat.

#### Digital Abuse

Abusive and controlling use of digital technologies in the context of abusive personal relationships, including:

- Excessive controlling texting.
- Sexual harassment, including requests for revealing images.
- Intrusion into private communications.

#### Digital Exploitation

Many teens use digital technologies to form personal relationships and may engage in non-abusive, consensual sexually-related interactions. However, concerns in this area include:

- Relationships ground in fantasy that can become abusive.
- Coercive pressure to provide revealing images (sexting).
- Distributing revealing images that were provided privately
- Grooming leading to sexual interactions--by an adult or teen, stranger or acquaintance.
- Sex trafficking.

#### Unsafe Digital Communities

Unsafe digital communities involved communities that support self-harm, such as anorexia or self-cutting, or engage in criminal activity or support hatred or violence, such as gangs and hate groups. These groups appear to have common features:

- Provide emotional support for marginalized youth.
- Adopt symbols and use online rituals to foster group identity--and exclude those who do not abide by norms.
- Rationalize self-harm or harmful behavior.

### Digital Environment

Features of this digital environment can have a positive or challenging impact in terms of prevention and intervention.

- *Limited Ability for Adults to Supervise*. We must focus on empowering young people to independently make the right choices, help others, and report.
- *Permanence of Digital Material*. Material can be easily distributed to cause harm. Provides "early warnings" and support more effective investigation and accountability.
- *Anonymity*. Makes it easier to engage in harm and avoid detection. Allows young people to anonymously seek help.
- *Wider Dissemination of Hurtful Material*. Distribution can cause greater harm. Knowledge that many can see digital acts may inhibit negative acts.
- *Networked Community*. Can increase hurtful involvement by others. Groups can be mobilized to stop the harm.
- *Wider Social Engagement*. Can facilitate forming of dangerous relationships. Allows socially marginalized youth to find supportive digital communities.
- *Change in Power Balance*. May lead to retaliatory aggression because it feels safer. Allows those with less social power to better challenge those who abuse power.

### Effective Prevention & Intervention

There are three key issues related to effective approaches.

#### No Evidence-Based Best Practices

The lack of evidence-based best practices means that districts must assume greater local responsibility to ensure the likelihood of success of their local programs.

- Ground approach in research and use effective practices.
- Conduct local needs assessment to determine students' norms, practices, negative incidents, and risk and protective factors. Use this data to develop objectives. Embracing Digital Youth is pioneering the use of web-based survey techniques to support planning, social norms instruction, and evaluation. See our site for more information.
- Assess effectiveness through periodic evaluation.

#### Importance of Peers

Adults are generally not present in digital environments. Teens often do not report negative situations to adults. They do tell their friends. Integrate the role of peers in prevention and intervention:

- Universal education that focuses on positive peer norms.
- Secondary prevention that empowers peers to help resolve negative situations by providing targets with support and advise, engaging in conflict resolution, and protesting harm.
- Tertiary intervention by adults made possible because peer witnesses know to report serious or unresolved situations.

#### Restorative Interventions

Recent research, as well as litigation, is raising questions about the effectiveness of school responses to student aggression. Students will not seek adult assistance if doing could make things much worse. Punitive interventions that generate anger can lead to digital retaliation that can be accomplished anonymously or by enlisting the support of online friends over whom a school has no authority. Use restorative interventions that hold students accountable for harm and focus on resolution and reconciliation.

# Comprehensive School Approach

The following is a research-guided approach that is grounded in best practices in bullying, violence, and suicide prevention, combined with insight into digital behavior of youth and legal issues.

## Comprehensive Multidisciplinary Planning

Engage in comprehensive planning involving school administrators, counselor/psychologists, health teachers, educational technology specialists, school nurses, and school resource officers. The comprehensive approach should address:

- Universal prevention through policies and education for all students, staff, and parents.
- Secondary prevention that focuses on developing student capacity for effective responses to digital risk situations, conflict resolution, and adult detection of concerns.
- Tertiary intervention that ensures effective investigation and is focused on restorative interventions.

## Needs Assessment

Conduct a student survey or focus groups to identify positive norms and practices, negative incidents, and to provide insight into underlying risk and protective factors.

## Policy & Protocols Review

Review and revise all policies and protocols related to situations that involving digital risk. Set up a web-based reporting vehicle for students to report any concerns.

- Include language in the district bullying and harassment policy that ensures students and parents have notice the school will intervene in situations where off-campus speech has or could cause a substantial disruption at school or interfere with the rights of students to be secure, including situations that could lead to violence, overall interference with the delivery of instruction, or significant interference with the ability of any other student to fully participate in school activities. Include provisions that require a full investigation, encourage restorative interventions, and ensure post-incident evaluation.
- Revise threat assessment and suicide prevention protocols.
- Develop reasonable policies to address hurtful use of cell phone and imaging devices.
- Develop a protocol with local law enforcement and community mental health professionals for investigating and intervening in the more significant concerns. Ensure the protection of students' constitutional rights. Promote community-based restoration.

## Professional Development

Implement a "tiered" approach to accomplish the necessary professional development. Key district educators require a high level of expertise in the area of these concerns. All safe school personnel require insight into concerns, especially ways to effectively detect, investigate, and intervene. Teachers who are instructing students about digital safety need insight into the concerns and how to influence safe and responsible behavior. All other staff require a general understanding within the context of the professional development they receive related to bullying prevention and youth risk.

## Parent and Community Outreach

Facilitate parent and community outreach through newsletters, parent workshops, and "just-in-time" resources at school. Provide outreach to community mental health professionals, community organizations, and the media.

## Student Education

Providing effective universal education will require collaborative efforts of all staff, but especially educational technology specialists, school librarians, and health teachers. Use a constructive education approach that engages students in learning from their peers and developing personal standards.

Cyber Savvy youth:

- *Keep Themselves Safe.* They understand the risks—and they know how to avoid getting into risky situations, to detect whether they are at risk, and to effectively respond.
- *Present a Positive Image.* They present themselves online as someone who make positive choices.
- *Respect Others.* They respect the rights, privacy, and property of others and treat others with civility.
- *Take Responsibility for the Well-being of Others.* They help others and report serious concerns to a responsible adult.

Incorporate these three key components:

- *Reinforce Positive Norms.* Universal education must promote the positive norms and effective practices held by the majority of the students. This can be accomplished through student-led constructive instruction, use of older students to teach younger students, and messaging ground in the insight into positive norms and practices derived through local surveys.
- *Strengthen Effective Skills.* Constructive instruction can also help students gain skills through sharing of effective practices and strategies. Effective skills include problem-solving and decision-making. Students must also recognize possible negative influences related to the use of technologies, as well as the influences for making positive choices.
- *Encourage Helpful Allies.* As helpful allies, young people can provide support to a peer who is at risk or being harmed, challenge irresponsible or hurtful behavior, and report unresolved or serious concerns. Increase skills in responding and emphasize the positive perspective of helpful allies.

## Investigation and Intervention

School officials, as well as law enforcement, must take the time to fully investigate any digital risk situation. School officials can use digital evidence to more fully understand the situation, but this evidence could be deceptive or not disclose the entire situation. It is important to gain an understanding of the entire situation—including face-to-face interactions, as well as digital.

Interventions that are punishment-based are unlikely to be effective and could lead to uncontrollable retaliation. Shift to restorative interventions that hold all parties accountable for harm they have caused and encourage restoration and reconciliation.

Get more information in Embracing Digital Youth's companion Issue Brief on *Investigation and Intervention*.

## Evaluation

Use a "continuous improvement" approach for evaluation based on local data. It is especially important to evaluate the effectiveness of school intervention efforts in specific situations.

# Embracing Digital Youth

*Embracing Digital Youth* (a program of Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use) promotes approaches that will best ensure all young people become cyber savvy and that seek to address youth risk in the digital age in a positive and restorative manner.

Web site: <http://embracingdigitalyouth.org>

E-mail: [info@embracingdigitalyouth.org](mailto:info@embracingdigitalyouth.org)

© 2011 Embracing Digital Youth. Permission to reproduce and distribute for non-profit, educational purposes is granted. Embracing Digital Youth is reliant on sponsorships and donations. If this document is widely distributed, a donation is requested. See our web site for more information.

Additional more extensive resources are available on the Embracing Digital Youth web site.

Nancy Willard's online course, *Empowering Students Against Digital Aggression, Abuse, and Exploitation* (Knowledge Delivery Systems) provides comprehensive coverage of these issues. Her new, *Cyber Savvy: Embracing Digital Safety and Civility* (Corwin Press), and online course, *Cyber Savvy: Promoting Students' Safe and Civil Internet Practice* (Knowledge Delivery Systems) insight into instructional approaches.