

# Student Digital Wellbeing and Safety Strategies

As young people access the internet at an increasingly younger age, it is crucial to prioritise their education on digital safety and wellbeing. Educators have expressed concerns about students accessing inappropriate content, lacking digital security, receiving inappropriate contact, sharing personal information, lacking understanding of online dangers, experiencing cyberbullying, and not comprehending the consequences of their online actions (Martin et al., 2022).

As a digital safety facilitator at Digital Waitaha Charitable Trust, I facilitate family digital safety and wellbeing workshops and engage with young people starting in year 0 within their learning environments to identify online safety issues and teach preventative digital wellbeing and safety strategies. My experience indicates that children are engaging in risky behaviour. Students as young as year 0 may already interact with strangers online verbally through games such as Call of Duty, and by the time students reach year 2, around 50% have interacted with strangers through games like Roblox and Fortnite. Furthermore, they participate in apps like Snapchat and TikTok before having the cognitive ability to comprehend the consequences of their online actions. I often face challenges implementing digital wellbeing and safety strategies due to conflicting opinions between parents and educators regarding who is responsible for teaching young people these skills. This controversy can create barriers that impede the effective implementation of strategies, making it challenging to ensure that students receive consistent messages about digital safety and wellbeing from both the home and school.

In order to enhance my professional skills and knowledge, I have conducted a literature review focusing on three main topics. The first topic is the implementation of digital safety and wellbeing strategies, the second is the barriers that prevent the successful implementation of such strategies, and the third is the implications of these findings for my particular context. I seek to analyse how these topics relate to my work and how I can use the insights gained from the literature to support and strengthen my practice.

### Definitions and Context

In my context, I teach digital safety and wellbeing strategies to students, parents, caregivers, and educators. While the terms digital safety, cyber-safety, cyber safety, internet safety, e-safety, and online safety are often used interchangeably in research (Bickham et al., 2021; Brandau et al., 2022; Buchanan et al., 2017; Mitra, 2020), I use the term digital safety in my practice. While there is a gap in the research for a definition of digital safety, Mitra (2020) describes it as a comprehensive approach encompassing safe and responsible use of online communication technologies and information. Furthermore, in my context, digital safety means mitigating online risks. A digitally safe online person makes responsible decisions, clearly understands the consequences of their online interactions and is empowered with appropriate strategies to handle online risk.

Digital wellbeing is the desired outcome of practising digitally safe online behaviours, which aligns with UNESCO's (2017) definition.

### Digital Safety and Wellbeing Strategy Implementation

The research on the implementation of digital safety and wellbeing strategies was limited in scope. The research reviewed looked at how these strategies were delivered in educational settings and supported at home.

Teaching digital safety and wellbeing strategies as part of a Digital Citizenship (DC) curriculum shows promise. Researchers have examined the effectiveness of the Common Sense Education DC curriculum among intermediate-age students and found it to have potential benefits (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2023; Brandau et al., 2022). Additionally, the Screenshots DC curriculum was found to improve online safety behaviours (Bickham et al., 2021). However, the research does not specify whether the improvements were related to personal online safety, data safety, or both. Moreover, a one-time DC intervention was insufficient to produce meaningful and lasting changes, and long-term interventions and programs that incorporate multiple models are likely necessary for behaviour change (Bickham et al., 2021).

Teacher concerns can prompt the implementation of digital wellbeing and safety strategies within their learning environments. This is done through teachers developing their own professional knowledge, modelling best practices and digital safety lessons. School measures include monitoring student activities, applying content filters, enabling firewalls, limiting access to certain times and specific websites and support from guidance counsellors (Martin et al., 2022). However, the research does not specify whether these implementations were proactive or reactive responses to situations within their learning environments.

Although research on the specific methods of integrating digital safety and wellbeing strategies is limited, studies have shown that various activities have been used to teach these strategies successfully. For instance, in Bickham et al. (2021), a range of methods were employed in the classroom, including listening to podcasts, teacher scripts, hands-on activities, scenario role-playing, student reflections, and a final project to tie all the previous lessons together. Parents adopt a range of strategies to support their children's digital safety and wellbeing, such as monitoring their online behaviour, issuing warnings, providing examples, and conducting visual inspections of social media interactions (Buchanan et al., 2017; Wang & Xing, 2018). However, there is variability in parental involvement (Buchanan et al., 2017), with children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds receiving higher parental support (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2023; Wang & Xing, 2018). The use of diverse strategies highlights the differences in approaches between parents and educators. While the specific strategies used in digital safety and wellbeing education are still being explored, it is clear that incorporating a range of activities and methods can be effective.

Despite the recognised need for embedding Digital Citizenship as an intervention within the curriculum and school practices, there is limited research on the topic. It has been suggested that integrating DC into the curriculum could facilitate implementation and provide detailed guidance on how to embed it within schools, thereby preventing low retention rates and providing better teacher support (Bickham et al., 2021).

New Zealand schools are tasked to develop Digital Citizenship and online safety management strategies that require a cohesive approach between the home, school, and community (Melhuish et al., 2018) plus, they have a legal obligation to reduce risk

and provide a secure environment for students and staff in schools while ensuring safe and responsible technology use (Teschers & Brown, 2019). However, there is a gap in research in New Zealand regarding student digital safety and risk (Teschers & Brown, 2019) and the implementation of digital safety and wellbeing strategies.

Although limited research has shown promise in the delivery of digital safety and wellbeing strategies in educational settings, there are still significant barriers to their implementation. In the next section barriers to implementation will be discussed in more detail.

### Barriers to Implementation

The research identified various obstacles to the implementation of digital safety and wellbeing strategies. These challenges were attributed to incorrect assumptions, insufficient support, inadequate confidence and skills, and differing opinions about who is ultimately responsible for implementing digital wellbeing and safety strategies.

Students and adults may assume that young people naturally have the capabilities required because they are digital natives. The concept of “digital native” suggests that young people instinctively know how to use technology responsibly and safely without training (ECDL Foundation, 2014). However, children are not necessarily aware of how their online actions have consequences (Buchanan et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is challenging to change deeply ingrained beliefs in young adolescents through direct education, especially on topics where they feel confident (Bickham et al., 2021).

There is also a need for more support, confidence, and ability among educators to incorporate these skills into their teaching practice. Unfortunately, school administrators have resorted to imposing restrictions instead of proactively teaching digital wellbeing and safety strategies. For instance, mobile phone use has already been restricted or banned in some New Zealand colleges to prevent issues in schools (Teschers & Brown, 2019). Additionally, when issues related to digital safety arise, school administrators may be uncertain about the appropriate approach to take (Martin et al., 2022). Furthermore, teachers often have competing priorities and require adequate training and support to integrate digital safety and wellbeing education effectively into their practice (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2023).

Efforts to promote digital safety and wellbeing are also impeded by the absence of clear boundaries and conflicting opinions regarding responsibility between home and school, which is partly caused by inconsistent messaging and differing views (Martin et al., 2022). Moreover, educators place more value on the role of parents in digital safety than parents themselves (RM, 2022), and parents often need more awareness or confidence to guide their children's safe and responsible use of digital technologies (Martin et al., 2022; Wang & Xing, 2018). Additionally, teachers have expressed the need for digital safety education for parents (Martin et al., 2022).

The identified obstacles to the implementation of digital safety and wellbeing strategies have important implications for policy and practice. The following section discusses the implications of the research and how they relate to my context.

### Implications for my context

While most of the research focused on intermediate-age students, researchers have emphasised the need to have digital safety and wellbeing interventions for young students (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2022), while adults are still the primary influencers and before negative behaviours are established (Bickham et al., 2021). According to Magis-Weinberg et al. (2023), promoting digital skills during early adolescence is crucial. However, this is not early enough. Digital safety and wellbeing strategies should be incorporated into children's education when they start using digital devices. It is comparable to teaching children road safety from the first time they cross the road rather than waiting until they almost get hit by a bus.

A significant challenge I face is engaging parents and making them aware of their essential role in ensuring their children's digital safety and wellbeing. However, a better understanding of home and school's differing opinions and responsibilities can help encourage parents to engage in digital safety education. Parent awareness and engagement are among the most significant predictors of children's digital safety, even more so than parental device controls (Wang & Xing, 2018). While there is limited research exploring the barriers parents face when assisting their children with managing their digital safety and wellbeing, further research on how to empower and encourage parents to become more involved and confident in their role is needed.

Despite the Ministry of Education (2014) stating that students are to acquire the necessary skills and values to keep themselves and others safe online as part of the Digital Citizenship curriculum, in my experience, digital safety is not a priority for all learning environments. This lack of priority is likely due partly to ambiguous boundaries and conflicting opinions between home and school about who is responsible for

teaching these strategies. Clear boundaries and responsibilities need to be established by the Ministry of Education, and digital safety and wellbeing must be firmly ensconced into the curriculum. Additionally, the school's policy and culture must also support the implementation of these strategies. It is challenging to embed digital safety into practice, even if it is part of the curriculum and the teacher is enthusiastic about it, if the school and the community are not also aligned. Research provides evidence to support this observation. Hammond (2020) argued that the integration of digital technologies in schools would benefit from aligning culture, policy, and practice. For teachers to effectively introduce digital technologies, they need support through professional development from their school leadership, school policies, and school culture. While Hammond (2020) argued for digital technology integration, it is not a stretch to apply it to digital safety and wellbeing implementation.

Introducing digital safety and wellbeing strategies through one-off interventions is insufficient to ensure that students retain and apply these strategies in the long term. In my practice, I have found that reinforcement of these strategies is necessary for students to develop a clear understanding of the consequences of their online interactions and to feel empowered with appropriate strategies to handle online risks. Encouraging feedback from students and parents has indicated that students are making good decisions regarding their digital safety and wellbeing due to ongoing sessions through Digital Waitaha or by involved parents. This observation is supported by research which has found that students are capable of understanding the consequences of their online behaviour and that their concerns and worries about online safety influenced their management of online interactions (Brandau et al., 2022;



Buchanan et al., 2017). These studies confirm that students can effectively manage their digital safety and wellbeing once they are taught appropriately. Additional feedback from students indicates they enjoy learning about digital safety and wellbeing strategies, which research supports. In Brandau et al. (2022), participants also expressed positive attitudes towards the relatability of the content and desired more content in addition to what was covered during the sessions.

### Conclusion

Research has shown promising results for implementing digital safety and wellbeing strategies either as a standalone or part of a Digital Citizenship programme.

Reinforcement of these strategies is necessary for long-term retention and application by students. Schools, educators and parents play an essential role in promoting digital wellbeing and safety. Despite the recognised need for embedding DC as an intervention within the curriculum and school practices, there needs to be more research in New Zealand regarding student digital safety and risk and the implementation of digital safety and wellbeing strategies.

Children are not always aware of the consequences of their actions online despite being digital natives. They require guidance from adults to mitigate online risks. Educators face challenges in teaching digital safety and wellbeing skills and effectively weaving them into their practice. Instead of supporting students, some educators and schools resort to using restrictions such as limiting device use or banning phones. The lack of clear boundaries and differing opinions on responsibility between home and school further impede efforts to promote digital safety and wellbeing. Furthermore, educators

place more value on the role of parents in digital safety than parents themselves, Though this may be due to parents needing more awareness and confidence to guide their children's safe and responsible use of digital technologies.

Introducing digital safety and wellbeing strategies at an early age can prevent the establishment of negative behaviours. While parental awareness and involvement are crucial to their child's digital wellbeing and safety, engaging parents is a significant challenge. Further research is needed on how to empower and encourage parents to become more involved and confident in this area. The lack of clear boundaries and responsibilities between home and school contributes to the lack of uptake by parents and schools. The absence of policies and culture supporting the implementation of digital safety and wellbeing strategies contributes to its limited priority in schools.

Young people often do not distinguish between offline and online experiences and interactions; to them, it is simply life. The risks involved are significant, making it all the more important to listen to and incorporate the voices of students in shaping digital safety and wellbeing strategies. While many of the barriers to implementing these strategies are beyond my control, I do have the ability to amplify the voice of the students I work with and to empower them to mitigate the risks they face online. Future research should investigate the role of student agency and how best to support young people to self-manage their online safety and wellbeing.

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