

Exploring identity, health and wellbeing in a digital environment

Introduction

This document is part of a series of three support materials aimed at assisting you in teaching children about safe and responsible use of digital technologies through the SPHE curriculum (1999).

This document focuses primarily on the SPHE Strand 'Myself' and looks at how children's digital technology use can influence their sense of self and can impact personal health and wellbeing. This support material should be read in conjunction with:

- Supporting the development of healthy online interactions
- Media education to support safe and responsible use of digital technologies.

SPHE provides children with opportunities to develop appreciation of the various influences on their lives. Through developing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, children can learn to manage their own behaviour and help them to have greater agency and control in their lives. Digital technologies are a significant influence in children's lives, with many children using digital devices before starting primary school. The SPHE curriculum can support children to be confident, responsible and critical users of digital technologies who learn, socialise and communicate in a safe, respectful and responsible way.

The sections are as follows:

- Exploring self-identity in a digital environment through SPHE
- Exploring personal health and wellbeing in a digital environment through SPHE
- Safety and protection online
- How can I support parents¹?
- Further reading.

Snapshot from research



Digital technologies include computers, tablets, software and applications, websites, social media, online games, robotics, cloud computing, and mobile devices (DES, 2017). Research shows that children are immersed in the digital environment. In education, there has been a shift in emphasis from learning about internet usage from a safety perspective to a more holistic approach to empower children to be active, engaged, respectful and responsible users of digital technology (Burns & Gottschalk, 2019). The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* highlights the important role schools play in promoting wellbeing and states that schools should provide *opportunities to develop necessary skills to cope with using online technology in a safe and appropriate way* (DES, 2019, p.12).

Exploring self-identity in a digital environment through SPHE

In SPHE lessons, children will have opportunities to explore self-identity and see themselves as unique individuals with different interests, abilities, strengths, and vulnerabilities. Individuality is expressed in many different ways, for example, through the clothes we wear or the activities and interests we pursue. Having a strong sense of identity is important in life for building healthy relationships, both with oneself and others. It is also important for developing a sense of belonging, where a person has the confidence to be themselves without feeling the need to change to fit in. When exploring self-identity in SPHE, there is an opportunity to explore both online and offline activities and interactions and how they can both influence our sense of self.

¹ Parents refers to mothers, fathers and those with parental responsibility in different parenting relationships. This may include foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, and carers.

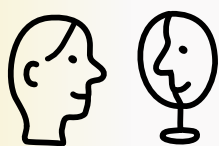
Exploring identity, health and wellbeing in a digital environment

A digital identity is *the representation of a person or organisation in online or digital environments* (DES, 2017). The things we do online form part of the online or digital identity we share with others, for example, the username, profile picture or avatar you choose, the information you share about yourself, the comments you make, the videos you watch, the games you play etc. When planning lessons around the topic of self-identity or digital identity, you might want to consider the following:

- **Self-identity as a lifelong process:** Developing a strong, confident sense of self is a process. A sense of self begins before a child starts school and continues into adulthood. While the SPHE curriculum is an ideal space to explore this, our identity is important in all aspects of life and should not be solely confined to SPHE lessons. The spiral and integrated nature of the curriculum will facilitate reflecting on self-identity regularly rather than in one off lessons. Remember to embrace and use teachable moments as they arise. Embracing and celebrating the diversity in your class is an opportunity to learn and grow. Take opportunities to celebrate their unique interests and differences.

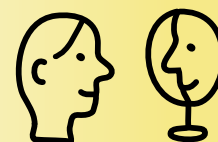
are different levels of engagement with digital technologies in your class. Some children may have greater levels of independence online while others will have more restricted use of digital technology. Digital technologies change rapidly and children are often ahead of the curve when it comes to new digital technologies. Including children's voices and perspectives will help you respond to the needs and interests of your class, as well as the positive aspect of digital technologies and the opportunities they afford. Try to focus your conversations on what motivates the children in your class to use digital technologies rather than the specific apps or online services they use. For example, talking about sharing or watching videos rather than naming the specific provider. "Tell me why you like watching videos online?"

Teacher Reflection



- Do I value and embrace diversity?
- What opportunities do I provide in my classroom for children to develop and express their identities?

Teacher Reflection



- What steps can I take to support the children to feel safe and comfortable voicing their views?
- How can I facilitate the children to express their views in different ways to best suit their needs and choices?
- How can I demonstrate that the children's views are valued and listened to?
- What strategies have I used previously that might be helpful here?

- **Connect with children's lived experience:** Strong teacher-pupil relationships are foundational in SPHE. A positive, caring, respectful classroom environment where students know they are valued and their opinions are listened to supports students to share their voice. You will be aware that there

You might like to try some of the following strategies and activities to support children to make choices about and be active in their learning:

- A **question box** can be a beneficial way for students to share key questions about a topic anonymously, to identify a topic they

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would like to explore and help to inform your planning to meet the current needs of their class. You might like to try Mentimeter, an interactive polling tool. You can find more information about using Mentimeter [here](#).

- **Thoughts in jar** can be used before an activity to gather prior knowledge and identify current learning needs or after an activity providing pupils an opportunity to reflect on learning and share their voice in a safe way. You might like to ask the children to share three activities they enjoy, either online or offline. If the children use post-its, these can then be displayed on the board and easily moved around to categorise activities and stimulate discussion.
- A **KWL chart** facilitates children to connect with prior knowledge about a topic, identify things they would like to know and reflect on what they have learned at the end of a topic. It can be useful to identify current learning needs in your class.
- **Circle games** can be a fun way to explore the different activities the children in your class like to do online. For example, “*swap places if you like to play computer games*” or “*swap places if you like to watch dance videos online*”.
- **Think, Pair, Share:** Ask the children to reflect on why they like to use digital technologies, explore this with a partner, then share one activity they both like to do and one activity that was different with the class. By recording the different activities as a poster or brainstorm, this will help the children to see the vast array of opportunities there are to express themselves online. In this way, they can begin to make connections and explore how they are similar to others in many ways but also, by exploring different views and perspectives, they can appreciate the diversity that exists within the class and that their

identity is unique to them.

- **‘This is me!’ poster:** Invite the children to choose or create an avatar/cartoon image for the centre of their poster. Next, invite them to draw and decorate the poster with pictures that represent them and the different activities they enjoy doing. These can be both online and offline activities to show that both form part of our identity. The children might enjoy guessing who made each poster based on the images chosen or perhaps they could present their poster to the class or a group to develop a confident sense of self.
- **Online reputation /digital footprint:** Online reputation *refers to the information that can be found about a person online. This can be used by others to build up a picture of this person* (BIK, 2020). A digital footprint is *the trail of data that is created and the information that exists as a result of online activity. This includes the websites visited, emails sent and information submitted to online services and providers* (DES, 2017, p. 14).

The SPHE curriculum places particular emphasis on developing a sense of personal responsibility for one’s own behaviour and actions. As children become more active online and are increasingly involved in decision making in a digital environment, they will begin to become aware that their choices online can have consequences, both positive and negative. Developing an awareness that their online activities form part of their online reputation or digital footprint can help empower young people to consciously act in a way that promotes a respectful, positive and inclusive online space. You might explain this by saying that every time someone posts, likes, or shares something online, this leaves a trace and all of these come together to form a digital footprint. The phrase “*Once you share, it stays out there*” might be useful to help the children in your class understand that when you share something online, you no longer have control over it. Even if you delete something, it may still be

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accessible. Teach your children strategies such as, “Stop, think, check” from [HTML Heroes \(Webwise\)](#), and identifying a trusted adult they can approach if they are unsure, can help children confidently navigate the online space.

important that children have the opportunity to reflect on and connect with how they feel when using digital technologies and the internet. By focusing on feelings and emotions, children can develop self-awareness and reflect on how their choices around digital use can impact their emotions, mood, motivation or energy levels, and encourage them to choose activities that offer positive experiences and boosts their self-esteem.

Snapshot from research



In the Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools (NCCA, 2019), primary school teachers most frequently suggested the impact of the internet and social media on children’s safety and self-identity as a topic that needs to be addressed.

- **Finding a balance between online and offline activities:** Reflective questions that focus thinking on how the children in your class feel before, during and after digital technology use, can help them make connections with how digital technologies makes them feel, both physically and mentally. Using a reflective approach can empower children to take ownership and responsibility for their choices and develop self-awareness to know when it is time to stop and take a break. Some children may find it difficult to take a break from technology. As a class, you could identify strategies for managing screen time, such as putting their smart device in another room, especially at night time, using a timer, having a set time of the day for using digital technologies, or making plans to meet with friends in person. These discussions will help your class develop self-management skills and take personal responsibility for their decisions. Learning about health and wellbeing is not confined to the SPHE curriculum and it is important to connect with other areas of the curriculum, such Physical Education.
- **Critical thinking skills:** Critical thinking skills underpin all strands of the SPHE curriculum and are essential when it comes to responsible use of digital technologies. Encourage the children in your class to be critical of how information is presented in digital media; how information can be presented in a way that is designed to influence them. The support

Exploring personal health and wellbeing in a digital environment through SPHE

Within the Strand Unit ‘Taking care of my body’, your class will explore what it means to be healthy and lead a balanced lifestyle. We know that spending too much time online can have a negative impact on peoples’ mental, physical, social and emotional health. Negative impacts can include distorted self-image or body-image, feelings of peer pressure, tiredness and poor concentration. Equally, we know that digital technologies can support wellbeing and can be a positive space, for example access to information, building connections and relationships, following exercise videos, practicing mindfulness through apps and videos.

When exploring health and wellbeing with your class, you can draw attention to the impact of digital technologies on this aspect of their lives:

- **Feelings and emotions:** Connecting with feelings and emotions can be a good place to start when exploring the impact digital technologies can have on a sense of self. It is

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material *Media education to support safe and responsible use of digital technologies* provides further information on this topic.

Safety and Protection:

Snapshot from research



The Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 (DoE, 2022) reports that when young people have competent digital skills, they are better equipped to deal with potential online risks.

It is best to use a holistic approach to safety and protection which is not overly focused on risks and dangers. The SPHE curriculum aims to empower children to be confident, active, engaged, respectful and responsible citizens. SPHE can support children to feel confident to reap the benefits of digital technologies while having an awareness of the risks and knowing how to navigate challenges as they arise. Below are some points to consider:

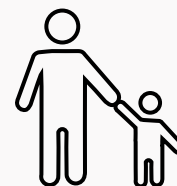
- **Keeping your identity safe:** In the mandatory Stay Safe Programme, children are taught the meaning of the terms 'personal' and 'private'. Building on this learning and understanding these terms will help support them to navigate digital environments in a safer way. Digital technologies are part of everyday life for children and many children are using chat functions and social media apps to communicate with friends, family and sometimes people they don't know. While it may be okay to share some personal information online, such as your favourite musician, some information should be kept private. It is important for children to understand that they should never share

personal information that would make them identifiable with a stranger online (someone they have not met offline), for example, their name, their school, their address or their date of birth. Provide opportunities for the children to develop their understanding of public and private information and discuss what information they can safely share online and which information they should keep private.

- **Using stories:** Using stories or case studies can be helpful way to introduce safety issues or sensitive topics. The fictional characters in stories can support children to explore potentially sensitive topics from a safer distance. The following stories explore the topic of online safety and may be useful to scaffold discussion:
 - **Becky's Story** (Cyberbullying video) included in the **3rd and 4th class Stay Safe Programme** deals with sharing information online.
 - **Digiduck stories** created by Childnet
 - **Goldilocks, A Hashtag Cautionary Tale** by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross
 - **Troll Stinks**, by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross
 - **Oscar's Adventures in the Online World** by Sarah Southworth and Sarah Graham (UK National Online Safety)

What's Next?

How can I support parents?



Home learning: You could provide written or reflective activities that encourage children to share some of their learning with parents.

Communications: Communicate with parents that you are learning about safe and responsible use of

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digital technologies. Before you begin the topic, you might consider inviting parents along with their child(ren) to complete an online survey to help you ascertain your class's level of engagement with digital technologies outside school. To further develop links between in school and at home learning, your school might consider organising a talk for parents.

There are many supports available for parents that you could share with them, including:

- **Webwise Parents Hub** provides information and support for parents, including:
 - **Parent's Guide to a Better Internet**
 - **#TalkListenLearn** supports parents to have conversations about responsible and safer internet use with their children.
- The ISPC **Digital Ready Hub** contains helpful information, articles and videos. You might like to share some articles, for example **"Digital Resilience - Helping your child take their first steps online"**
- The National Parent's Council have a series of **webinars**. Webinar #3 looks at online life.

Further reading



- **Webwise.ie:** You will find information, advice and free education resources addressing a range of internet safety issues and concerns. You might like to look at the following:
 - **Advice for Teachers**
 - **Introducing Online Safety to the Primary Classroom – Considerations for Teachers**
- **PDST Technology in Education** aims to promote and support the integration of technology in teaching and learning. You might like to look at their **Good Practice Videos**

- **CO:RE | Children Online: Research and Evidence Project** is a European platform for research and evidence on the experiences of children and young people in digital communication spaces and the effects of technological changes on children and young people.

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