

Supporting the development of healthy online interactions

Introduction

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

This document focuses on how the SPHE curriculum can support children in learning about interacting with and relating to friends and other people online in a healthy, respectful, safe and responsible way. This support material should be read in conjunction with:

- Exploring identity, health and wellbeing in a digital environment
- Media education to support safe and responsible use of digital technologies.

The sections are as follows:

- Connecting with children's lived experience
- Cyberbullying
- Promoting a positive environment for all
- How can I support parents¹?
- Further reading.

Connecting with children's lived experience

According to the National Advisory Council for Online Safety (NACOS, 2021), the most commonly reported online activities for children in Ireland are for entertainment purposes, including watching videos, listening to music and communicating with friends and family. The children in your class will have varying levels of engagement and families will have different rules around digital technologies. Take the time to find out about your class's use of digital technology. Eliciting why they use the internet will help you focus your lessons to the interests of your class and foster learning that is linked to and relevant to your children's lived experience. You can find ideas on how to connect with children's prior experience and support them to be

active identifying their learning needs in the document *Exploring identity, health and wellbeing in a digital environment*.

Snapshot from research



Technology has changed how children communicate and interact with others. UNICEF (2017) report that children under 18 account for one-third of internet users around the world. Traditionally, education that focused on internet safety explored the concept from a protectionist perspective. This approach urged children to be cautious about interacting with others online and to avoid risky behaviour, such as engaging with people they have never met offline and giving out personal information. Research by O'Neill and Laouris (2013) found that when internet safety messages are presented in isolation from children's lived experience, they tend to be reactive, overly protectionist and focused on fear and avoidance strategies rather than empowering a healthy and responsible use of digital technologies. More recently, there has been a shift from creating a safer internet to a better internet, with a focus on fostering and contributing to a positive online space empowering confident, active and resilient participants in digital life.

Cyberbullying

In the *Cinéaltas: Action Plan on Bullying* (Department of Education, 2022, p. 20) bullying behaviour is defined as:

targeted behaviour, online or offline, that causes harm. The harm can be physical, social and/or emotional in nature. Bullying behaviour is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power in relationships between two people or groups of people in society.

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.

Supporting the development of healthy online interactions

Snapshot from research



The National Advisory Centre for Online Safety (2021) found that a nasty or hurtful message was the most commonly reported form of cyberbullying. Research by CyberSafeKids (2022) found that 28% of children aged 8-12 had experienced some form of online bullying in 12 months prior to their study, with the most common experience being kept out of chat or messaging groups.

Cyberbullying refers to bullying which takes place using digital technology such as the internet or a mobile phone. It is deliberate and intended to cause harm. Forms of cyberbullying include, but are not limited to, social exclusion, impersonation, sending negative or hurtful messages, non-consensual sharing of videos or images, and intimidation.

Take time to familiarise yourself with your school's Anti-Bullying Policy, the procedures for which are outlined in [circular 0045/2013](#). A school's anti-bullying policy must explicitly address cyberbullying. Best practice for both preventing and tackling bullying requires a whole-school approach with a shared understanding of what bullying is and its impact. Updated anti-bullying procedures for schools are due to be published in autumn 2023.

In the **Stay Safe** programme, which is **mandatory** for all primary schools, the children in your class will learn that bullying is always wrong. Cyberbullying is introduced in the 1st and 2nd class programme. Children learn what cyberbullying is, develop an understanding of its impact, identify strategies for dealing with and preventing cyberbullying, and learn that they should always tell a trusted adult if they experience or witness cyberbullying.

[The Anti-Bullying Centre](#) (DCU) and [Webwise](#), the Irish Internet Safety Awareness Centre, have developed many resources and supports that specifically address cyberbullying. These can be used to build on learning from the Stay Safe programme. For example:

- [FUSE Anti-Bullying & Online Safety](#)

[Programme](#), developed by DCU Anti-Bullying Centre: the 5th and 6th class programme addresses the topic of cyberbullying, including how to be a good friend online, exploring the difference between 'online conflict' and 'cyberbullying', and the role of bystanders.

- [HTML Heroes \(Webwise\)](#) deals with the skills required to safely and effectively communicate online. There are two programmes, one for 1st and 2nd class, and another for children in 3rd and 4th class.
- [MySelfie and the Wider World \(Webwise\)](#) is a programme on the topic of cyberbullying developed for 5th and 6th classes.
- [Be Kind Online](#) is a programme developed in partnership with An Garda Síochána for 3rd and 4th class pupils. It promotes respectful online communication and aims to develop the skills necessary for dealing effectively with cyberbullying.

Promoting a positive digital environment for all

Snapshot from research



The cornerstone in preventing bullying is a positive school climate that welcomes and celebrates diversity and is based on inclusivity and respect (DES, 2013, p.3). An Irish study by D'Urso, Symonds, Sloan & Devine (2022) found a link between social and emotional competence and bullying, with both bullies and victims found to have lower levels of social and emotional competence compared to children who were not involved. This study argues that promoting positive relationships, developing social and emotional skills including empathy and emotional regulation, can be a protective factor. A child who experiences a positive, caring classroom climate is at a reduced risk of being a victim of bullying, regardless of their own social and emotional competence.

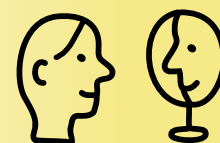
Supporting the development of healthy online interactions

A core aim of the SPHE curriculum is to foster a sense of care and respect for oneself and others. During SPHE lessons about friendship and relating to others, children learn to care for and respect others. Take time to make connections between children's offline and online activities to help the children in your class understand their responsibility to treat others with dignity and respect is the same online and offline.

You might like to consider the following points when preparing for this topic:

- **Developing Empathy:** Developing empathy is essential for handling and managing relationships, promoting compassion and sensitivity and appreciating diversity (SPHE Guidelines, p. 12). Developing empathy is not confined to the SPHE curriculum. Try to be open to teachable moments that arise where you can model empathy, compassion and respectful communication. For example, acknowledge and validate children's emotions and help them to communicate their emotions in a healthy and appropriate way: "Your behaviour is telling me that you might be feeling angry about something. Can you tell how you are feeling? Let's think of a way to express your anger safely." Similarly, use teachable moments to support the children in your class to observe others' emotions by pointing out facial expressions or body language: "I can see that John is upset as he has tears in his eyes and he is frowning."

In a digital environment, where it can be more challenging to read emotions, empathy will support children to see others' perspectives and appreciate how their actions and behaviours can impact others. For older classes, you could consider creating a fake comment thread for a photo that includes some hurtful comments to stimulate a class discussion. "How do you think the person reading these comments would feel?" "Do you think someone would say these words in a face-to-face situation?" "What would you do differently?"



Teacher Reflection

- Can you think of opportunities in your classroom to teach/model empathy?
 - Are there any resources or activities you have used that are particularly helpful at developing children's empathy?
- **Conflict resolution and the power of language:** The SPHE Curriculum promotes the use of respectful language. Within the Strand 'Myself and Others', the children in your class can explore reasons why conflicts arise, various ways to respond to conflict and practice how to handle conflict appropriately. Conflict resolution skills are essential for establishing healthy and supportive relationships. When discussing the topic of conflict within SPHE lessons, there is an opportunity to make connections between online and offline behaviour and explore similarities and differences between conflicts that may arise online or in person and discuss appropriate strategies. For example, you could discuss what to do if someone says something hurtful to you when playing in the yard or sends hurtful messages in the chat box while gaming. Would the same strategies work in both situations? As a class, you could come up with ideas to promote a positive experience for all when playing together whether in person and online. The videos '[Áine's Story](#)' or '[Donal's Story](#)' from the programme [Be Kind Online](#) might be helpful to scaffold conversations around the power of language and the importance of using respectful language in all situations.

Supporting the development of healthy online interactions

Snapshot from research



Ireland introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018 and the Data Protection Act 2018 set the digital age of consent to 16 years old. This is the age at which children can legally consent to companies or organisations processing their personal data. Companies, such as social media companies, require parental consent before they can collect personal data for children under the age of 16. However, children and young people can easily bypass this age restriction by using a false date of birth. CyberSafeKids (2022) reported that, in Ireland, 95% of 8-12 year olds they surveyed had their own smart device and 87% had their own social media account.

- **Consent and digital consent:** Consent is when we seek permission for something to happen or make an agreement to do something. For more information on the concept of consent, you might like to look at the support material '*Teaching about consent*'. Digital consent is about protecting personal privacy online and respecting the privacy of others. It refers to asking and receiving permission online, for example asking permission before sharing someone else's image, video or text message online. Learning about digital consent also includes developing an awareness of rights, such as having the right to decide if you allow your content to be used by someone else and how you would like to manage your online identity and privacy.

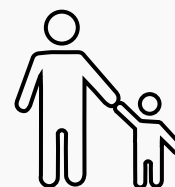
Consent is an important feature of healthy relationships, both offline and online. Stories can be a helpful way to scaffold conversations about consent. For example, in 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' you can explore questions around consent including: "*Did Goldilocks seek permission before touching someone else's things?*" This learning can be expanded upon to explore digital consent using the story

'#Goldilocks - A Hashtag Cautionary Tale' by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross. "*Did Goldilocks seek permission before sharing photos of others online?*" For older children, **MySelfie and the Wider World (Webwise)** explores the topic of digital photo sharing. The video '**The Photo**' could be used as a stimulus for discussion around responsible photo sharing practices.

- **Whole School Approach:** SPHE does not begin or end in the classroom and is most effective when there is a whole school approach where responsibility is shared by teachers, children, parents, the Board of Management and relevant members of the community. Whole school initiatives can be an opportunity to increase awareness of and promote learning about responsible use of digital technologies. Your school might like to get involved in Safer Internet Day, an EU wide initiative. You can find out more information [here](#). You school might organising a talk for parents.

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 will be learning about safe and responsible use of digital technologies and share your approach to teaching the topic. You might like to invite 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. You may consider sharing some of the following links with parents:

Supporting the development of healthy online interactions

- **Webwise Parents Hub** provides information and support for parents, including:
 - **#TalkListenLearn** supports parents to have conversations about responsible and safer internet use with their children.
 - Webinar: **Empowering Healthy Online Behaviour in Younger Children - #BeKindOnline**
- Fuse, Anti Bullying Centre, DCU **parent-hub**:
 - **How to Deal with Cyberbullying.**
- ISPPC: **Online Risks and Cyberbullying**

Further reading



- Department of Education:
 - **Anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools (2013)**
 - **Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying. Ireland's Whole Education Approach to preventing and addressing bullying in schools. (2022)**
- **Webwise.ie**: You'll find information, advice and free education resources. The following might be of interest to you:
 - **Advice for Teachers**
 - **Introducing Online Safety to the Primary Classroom – Considerations for Teachers**
 - **10 Themes of Digital Citizenship**
- Anti Bullying Centre, DCU:
 - **The Role of Parents in Preventing Bullying and Cyberbullying**
 - **Teachers' Attitudes Toward Bullying: Do Bullying Subtypes Matter?**
 - **Glossary of terms for cyberbullying.**

References

- CyberSafeKids (2022). *CyberSafeKids Academic Year in Review 2021-2022*. CyberSafeKids, Dublin. Available at: https://www.cybersafekids.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CSK_YearInReview_2021-2022_FINAL.pdf
- Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2013). *Circular 0045/2013, Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cb6966-anti-bullying-procedures-for-primary-and-post-primary-schools/>
- D'Urso, G., Symonds, J., Sloan, S. and Devine, D. (2022). 'Bullies, victims, and meanies: the role of child and classmate social and emotional competencies'. *Social Psychology of Education*, pp.1-20.
- National Advisory Council for Online Safety (NACOS) (2021). *Report of a National Survey of Children, their Parents and Adults regarding Online Safety 2021*, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Dublin. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ebe58-national-advisory-council-for-online-safety-nacos/>
- Government of Ireland (1999). *Social, Personal and Health Education*. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/462570f8-27cc-4f5b-a13e-d1e2de8c18d2/PSEC06_SPHE_curriculum.pdf
- O'Neill, B., & Laouris, Y. (2013). Teaching internet safety, promoting digital literacy: the dual role of education and schools. In B. O'Neill, E. Staksrud, & S. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Towards a better internet for children? Policy pillars, players and paradoxes*. Goteborg: Nordicom, UNESCO International Clearinghouse for Children, Youth and Media.
- UNICEF (2017). *The State of the World's Children 2017, Children in a Digital World*, UNICEF, New York.